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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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WITH DANGER!**

AFFAIR OF DEATH

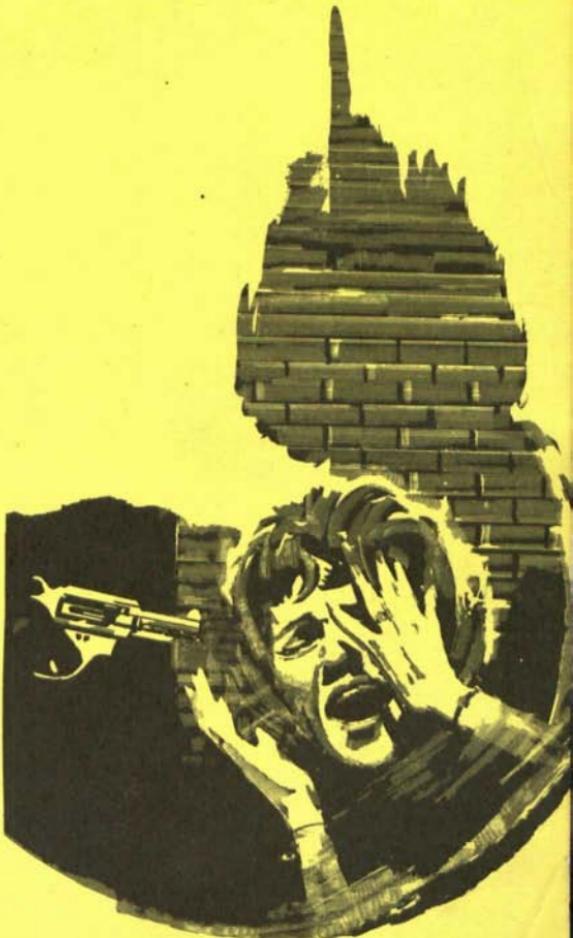
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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



AUGUST, 1968

VOL. 23, NO. 3

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

AFFAIR OF DEATH

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Silent, hidden, a man who killed women waited for his next victim. Who was he? And who would be next to die? Only Mike Shayne guessed—and dared to bait a trap which could only too well cost him his own life.

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AFFAIR OF DEATH

He was a lady-killer, all right. Two dead women could attest to that. But—who was he? And who was his next victim? Only Mike Shayne guessed—and dared go where a killer's bullets waited . . .

by BRETT HALLIDAY



MICHAEL SHAYNE hadn't had a new client for three days when Mr. Richard S. Piper came into his inner office.

Shayne was down to his last double crostic when Lucy Hamilton buzzed and announced the appearance of Mr. Piper.

"Shoo him in, Angel," Shayne said to his pert secretary.

The redhead sat back and lighted a cigarette. It was not often these days that he did not have an active case to work on, and desk

work and inaction made him as restless as a lion in a desert. He looked at the door with anticipation.

"Mr. Shayne?"

Richard S. Piper was not encouraging. A slender, but not small man, Piper didn't walk into the inner office; he sort of shuffled. Hat in both pale hands, Piper blinked and glanced all around as he approached Shayne's desk. Something that was meant to be a smile was on Piper's face, but it didn't quite make it. It was too nervous to be a smile.

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THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



"Sit down, Mr. Piper," Shayne said.

"I'm—I'm afraid, Mr. Shayne. I know he intends to do me some harm."

There was an unpleasant whine to Piper's voice. Up close, Shayne saw that the man was almost six feet tall, not heavy but not skinny, either.

It was the way Piper stood, bent, shuffled that made him seem smaller, fragile.

"I'm here to help out with troubles, Mr. Piper," Shayne said. "If you'll just sit—"

"Yes, yes," Piper snapped petulantly. "Give me a minute, please. I'm—I'm not accustomed to this kind of thing. I detest animal types!"

Shayne lit a cigarette. He did not like Mr. Richard S. Piper. But he had learned long ago that a detective did not have to like a client. Even the worst creep got into trouble and needed help.

Piper sat down, smiled weakly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne. My nerves are on edge. I've never been able to handle this kind of physical threat."

"Most men aren't used to physical violence, Mr. Piper," Shayne said. "You want to tell me what the trouble is?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Piper said, twisted his hat in his hands. They were large hands, yet somehow diffident. "Well, his name is Dan Conover. He's—big. Nasty. I think

he's some kind of gambler, or criminal, or both, perhaps."

"What is Conover doing, Mr. Piper?"

The man blinked. "What? Oh, why he's my wife's latest. I mean, she's done this before, many times. She's not very—well, faithful. She never has been. I've thought of leaving her, but you see, I love her. I want her to stay with me."

"Why not tell her to knock it off or else?" Shayne said. "If she wants to stay with you, you might be surprised by her reaction."

"I'm a coward, Mr. Shayne," Piper said. "It's that simple. I can't risk losing her."

Shayne sighed. "Which she knows and uses."

"Which she knows and uses," Piper said. "Perhaps, though, she will grow tired of her little adventures some day."

Shayne felt a little sick listening to Piper, but he only said, "What do you expect me to do?"

"About Sandra, nothing," Piper said. "But there is something different this time. Conover is a criminal, I'm sure of it, and somehow I have the feeling that he is not simply after an affair with my wife."

"Why not? She sounds available. Most men like an available woman."

"In the first place, she's older than he is. Second, he has a woman. I've seen her. Third, he's a smooth, yet uncouth person I would not expect to be attracted to my

wife. Sandra is a rather aloof, cool, caustic type. Fourth, I've seen him around my office at times, seemingly watching. And fifth, he's following me, studying me and my actions."

Shayne raised a shaggy red eyebrow. "You've been keeping a pretty close eye on him, Piper. Do you always check your wife's boyfriends so closely?"

"Usually, yes," Piper said. "I snoop, I admit it. I want to know who and what they are, and what goes on and when."

Shayne was slightly disgusted—the man got kicks from peeping on his wife, lurking around like a spaniel, watching. But—

"You're sure he's been watching and trailing you?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I may be a coward, but I'm quite alert. And I see no reason for a lover of my wife to be so interested in me."

"Maybe he wants to marry her," Shayne said. "Maybe he's out to get something on you."

Piper only smiled. "I don't think so, Mr. Shayne. He does not seem to be the marrying type, and why marry Sandra when he can get all he wants without it? No, it's me he's after—and that's what worries me."

"Why would he be after you?"

"Yes," Piper said. "Why?"

Shayne considered the nervous man. "Do you have a lot of money? Enough for anyone to think you could be blackmailed into paying to have your wife left alone?"



Piper thought. "Well, I'm far from rich. I do have a fair bank account and stocks, perhaps fifty thousand dollars all told. But I wouldn't pay to have my wife left alone. It would only happen again with another man."

"Conover may not know that," Shayne said. "It's an ancient play by a kind of con-man who's good with ladies, especially against the wives of older men, or weak men."

Piper winced. "Yes, I understand. But surely he would have learned about Sandra's history."

"Not necessarily. And if she's enjoying herself she wouldn't tell him. How about insurance?"

"Insurance?" Piper said slowly. "You mean, you think my wife—"

"Wives have been known to," Shayne said. "She doesn't seem to respect you. Maybe she thinks she's found the big romance this time, only Conover needs money. Di-

vorced she gets zero, widowed she gets—how much?"

"Another fifty thousand dollars," Piper said.

"Any children?"

"No."

Shayne considered the nervous man. He didn't like Richard S. Piper, and he didn't like the sound of the situation. A hundred-to-one it was the weak husband out to use a private detective to make some muscle against a boy friend of his wife.

But—

If this Conover were really a no-good out on some scheme, even a man like Piper deserved some help, and a detective's job was to prevent as well as solve and catch. Besides, he was bored with inaction.

From such reasoning cases are born.

"Okay, I'll smell around some," Shayne said. "I get one hundred dollars a day plus expenses. Pay my secretary three days in advance."

II

THE FIRST THING Mike Shayne did was find out about Richard S. Piper. There wasn't much to learn. Piper was forty-six, a graduate of Cornell University, had come to Miami directly from his war service in the army during World War II. He had had a series of jobs for about three years, and then had set-

tled at an outfit called Art Imports, Inc.

Art Imports, Inc. was engaged in buying and wholesaling primitive and Oriental art, much of the primitive stuff from South America. Piper had worked up steadily over the years until he was now import manager. His credit rating was solid. His home, in an upper middle-class tract in a southern suburb of the city, was valued at about \$40,000—modest enough.

Piper had married Sandra Dowd twelve years ago. His private life was apparently quiet and even tame—a little golf at his country club, a little small-stake poker, at which he usually won.

Dan Conover turned out to have lived a considerably more colorful life.

"Yeh," Will Gentry said when Shayne called to ask about Conover, "I know Dan Conover, Mike. Not the worst man in Miami, but a long way from the best. A middle-aged roustabout. Not really middle-aged yet, but shop-worn. I'll put you onto R and I about him."

On Chief Gentry's instructions, Records & Identification gave Mike Shayne a full run-down on Daniel J. Conover, aged forty-two. Conover was a con-man—Piper at least had a good eye for character. But Conover was something more—a gambler, plunger, and general parasite with a record of violence unusual in a con artist.

"The fact is," the lieutenant at

R & I said, "Conover isn't really a bunco artist. Dan plays crude badger games and husband-squeezes, but he's really just a drifter with muscles. He's done two short jolts for assault, -one for strong-arm robbery. He's got a bad temper. A muscleman. Not too much skill at it, which is why he gets caught.

"The thing is, Mike, that Conover is really just a punk, a gaudy bum, you understand? A parasite, a preyer on women, who gets out of hand now and then. The two assault raps were really brawls over gambling winnings, and the strong-arm robbery was actually just a spur-of-the-moment drunk rolling. He's mostly a small operator trying to live big without working, but every now and then he loses his head."

"When was the last rap?"

"Six years ago. Not even an arrest since. I hear he's been doing well at the track and the dice tables, but with Conover something could blow any time. It depends on the situation. He's the kind of nut who'll go along working small marks and gambling for rent money for years, and then get in a bind and figure he can rob Fort Knox."

Shayne thought it over for a time. It could be that Piper had some pretty good reason to worry. On the other hand it could be nothing more than a known womanizer making some time with a willing wife. He waited for a picture to be sent from R & I.

Shayne went to lunch, and then drove to the address R & I had given him for Dan Conover. It was a fairly expensive garden apartment in a beach section of Miami Beach. Not a residence of the wealthy, but not cheap, either. Shayne looked around to see that there was only the one normal exit from the complex of two-story apartments.

He parked his car and lighted a cigarette and took up a stake-out. For most of the afternoon young, blond men with tans too deep to have been obtained working anywhere, and pretty girls in various stages of beach undress, skipped in and out of the buildings.

Shayne smoked and yawned. It was nearly four o'clock before he spotted his man. Conover had aged since the R & I picture had been taken, but Shayne had no doubt of his man.

Conover was tall and muscular, with an easy, arrogant, slouching walk as if he owned the world and no one was going to hurry him. He looked around constantly from beneath lowered brows—slow, lazy glancing at everything and everyone with slightly narrowed eyes.

He wore a gaudy sport coat and well-cut slacks that fitted his slim figure like a glove. Suede shoes, blue, a dark blue shirt, a yellow-figured tie completed Conover's ensemble. It was not much of an outfit to be tailing someone in, if Conover was tailing Piper, but it was

about what Mike Shayne would have expected from Conover.

He watched from his car as Conover turned into the apartment court and stopped at the desk inside a glass-walled lobby. There seemed to be no mail for Conover, but the doorman talked to Conover for a moment. Conover seemed to grin.

Shayne remained in his car for some twenty minutes after the muscle-man had vanished toward his apartment. He saw nothing else suspicious, and decided to have a closer look. He checked his automatic, and stepped out of his car.

He skirted the lobby and went in through the open courtyard. Conover's apartment was B-6. That meant it was on the second floor, and in one of the two rear sections. Shayne moved quietly and in the shadow of the balcony overhang that ran around the second floor of the buildings above the courtyard.

From the shadows under the balcony he looked across the court to where the door of B-6 was closed and silent on the second floor balcony of the rear building. Even at the distance he could see that it had one unique aspect: it had an enormous brass knocker in the shape of a naked woman. Dan Conover was not a subtle man.

Shayne saw no signs of movement at the two front windows of the apartment. He worked his way around in the shadows until he had reached the bottom of the stairs up to the second floor balcony. There

he stopped and considered. He was not sure whether to brace Conover directly or not.

On the one hand, bracing the muscle-man would put Conover on guard. On the other hand, that was more or less what he wanted to do —stop Conover from following Piper, discourage the man from any devious plan he might have in mind.

It was a calculated risk. Conover might be scared off if he knew Shayne was watching him, or he might just become more careful and go on with his plan more warily.

Shayne was still considering which course would be best, when his decision was made for him.

Screams suddenly rent the evening air.

Loud, female screams from apartment B-6.

Shayne took the stairs two at a time.

III

THE SCREAMS ECHOED loud and shrill, over and over and rising in volume as if the female screamer were not even pausing for breath.

Mike Shayne hit the balcony at the dead run and skidded to a stop in front of the obscene brass knocker on the door of B-6. Even as he raised his big fist to knock on the closed door he made his decision whether to draw his automatic or not. He decided against it.

The screams had given him his

chance to do both of his alternative ideas; to see and more or less brace Conover, and at the same time not tip his hand to the man. He was just a good Samaritan coming to the aid of a lady in trouble.

He knocked loudly.

"What's going on?" he shouted.
"Open up in there!"

A man's voice growled something that sounded uncomplimentary.

"Help!" a girl's voice called.

Shayne tried the door knob. Locked.

"I'm coming in, mister!" Shayne roared.

He backed off and hit the door with all the bulk of his shoulder. The door shook and creaked but did not open. There were footsteps. The door opened. Dan Conover stood in anger with his left shoulder slightly lowered, balanced on the balls of his feet.

"Beat it," Conover said.

"You want the cops?" Shayne said.

Doors all around the courtyard were open now. At the rear door of the office the doorman was watching.

Conover licked at his lips. An ingratiating smile creased his face. His eyes were not smiling.

"Just a little love spat, friend," Conover said. "Why don't you just forget it?"

"It didn't sound like—" Shayne began, trying to see past Conover, but all he could see was part of a



LUCY HAMILTON

living room and the kitchenette beyond.

"Go away. Tell them it was all a joke," Conover said, his eyes narrowing and his shoulder lowering a hair.

Shayne watched Conover tensing for a punch. The man had the muscles, but he telegraphed his actions. Then Shayne heard a sound of movement.

"No! Don't go!" a girl's voice said, sounding scared.

"I guess I'm coming in," Shayne said.

Conover seemed to freeze, and

then stepped back, smiling. "I guess you are. Come ahead."

Shayne stepped into the apartment. The woman was seated on a black couch. A girl, not a woman. She was seated with her legs drawn up, knees to chin, huddled back in the corner of the couch. She raised her head as Shayne came in, and her eyes were wide with sheer terror.

A wide red mark on her face from ear to chin showed where she had been hit. The mark of a slap. There were no other marks on her. Shayne decided that she could not be a day over eighteen, and she did not appear to have been knocked around enough to account for the volume of her screams.

"She's a great little actress, friend," Conover said.

Shayne turned on him. "Is she? Maybe she's just smart enough to let out a scream before anything happens."

"Look, buddy," Conover said testily, "I don't owe you no explanations, see? The lady and I had an argument. She gave me this," and Conover held up his left hand which had five clear, bloody scratches on it from a female's sharp fingernails, "and I gave her a slap. Okay?"

The girl suddenly said, "He was going to beat me up. He said he was. I screamed. You bet I screamed. He's crazy!"

Conover just looked at her.

"He's got a gun, too. He was go-

ing to shoot me. I had to scream. You better call the cops, mister."

"For God's sake, Jo-Ann, knock it off, will you?" Conover said. "You'll have this joker believing you soon."

Shayne watched them both. Conover didn't seem especially worried, just annoyed. The girl, Jo-Ann, was still looking scared, but there was something about her face that made Shayne wonder.

Her eyes were scared, and her face exhibited blatant alarm—and yet she did not really seem scared. There was a faint crinkle around her mouth that could be amusement.

"Of course he'll believe me, darling," Jo-Ann said. "Why not? I've been hit and I screamed. You'd have fun with the police, wouldn't you?"

"You know what you are, Jo-Ann?" Conover said.

Her nostrils dilated. "No, tell me? What am I, lover?"

Conover gave a laugh, and cocked an eye at Shayne. "You got the picture, friend? This little lady and me were having an argument. She's something of a nut. She scratched me, said if I hit her she'd scream. I hit her. She screamed, and you came in like Jack Armstrong."

Jo-Ann looked at Shayne. She suddenly grinned. "You're a big one, aren't you? I like big men. I'll bet you wouldn't hit a lady."

"A lady?" Conover said.

"If you did hit me," Jo-Ann said to Shayne, "I'll bet I'd stay hit. I'll bet you wouldn't let me scream."

All trace of fear had gone from the girl—instantly, like a mask dropping. Her small face watched Shayne like a hungry animal. Her body untwined into a long, slim sexiness from its former fear shell.

"Aren't you afraid this guy'll hit you again, miss?" Shayne said, becoming aware of the fact that Jo-Ann, whatever she was, was not in any great danger.

"Why don't you beat Danny boy up so he can't hit me?" Jo-Ann said brightly, her eyes on Mike Shayne.

"All right," Conover said, "that's it, kid."

But Jo-Ann was still watching Shayne, a gleam of anticipation in her eyes, her lips moving, working. "Go on, hit him. Beat him up. You're big enough. A fight! A real fight. I'll—"

Conover looked at Shayne. "Out! Right now, friend. You get the picture. Now you go. Right?"

Shayne would have liked to stay long enough to see more, to learn some more about Conover, but the way Jo-Ann was acting he had no real excuse, except to fight Conover for her. He started for the door.

"Hey!" Jo-Ann cried.

Shayne turned. The girl was looking at Conover with real apprehension now. Not fear, exactly, but with more than a little nervousness. The almost purple color of

Conover's face seemed to show that Conover might be a little mad.

"I'm coming too," Jo-Ann said, half grinning, but more than wary about being left alone. "Lover boy here looks annoyed with little me. I think I'll just walk along with you, mister."

"No!" Conover said. The muscle-man grabbed at the girl.

She giggled and evaded him and ran with catlike speed to Shayne. She hid behind the redhead. She grinned at Conover.

"I'll see you later, lover, when you've cooled down."

Conover swore and stepped toward Shayne.

"The lady wants to leave," Shayne said.

For a moment he thought Conover was going to swing on him. Then the man shrugged and turned his back.

"Let her leave," Conover said, and whirled again. "But lay off, mister. You hear? No ideas. No plans. I wouldn't like it, and I'll remember you."

"Are you going to let him—" Jo-Ann began in Shayne's direction.

Shayne didn't even answer her. He went out the open door. Jo-Ann followed hurriedly. Conover didn't even look after them. Outside Shayne went down the steps and out toward his car with the girl following. Her long slim legs had little trouble keeping up with him.

"But he did hit me," Jo-Ann protested. "I was scared."

Shayne looked down at her. "Something tells me he should be scared."

She giggled, then stuck her tongue out at Shayne, and walked toward a small foreign car. As she got in, she looked back at Shayne once.

"You can find me at *The Red Mill*," she said, "almost any time."

Then she started the motor and roared off in a squeal of rubber. Shayne got into his car. He lit a cigarette. He settled down to wait again.

At least he had learned one thing—if Dan Conover was playing with Sandra Piper, he was not putting all his eggs in one basket. Men only slap women they feel pretty close to, and women only scratch men they can count on.

Dan Conover had a girl friend, and a tough one.

So maybe there was another reason for his interest in Sandra Piper.

IV

IT WAS DARK before Dan Conover came out again, and no one went in who matched the description of Sandra Piper. Mike Shayne was pretty hungry by the time the muscular man came out.

Conover seemed to have no suspicion that anyone was trailing him. Apparently the muscular hoodlum had accepted Shayne as no more than a passing good Samaritan. He looked neither right nor left, but

strode straight to his car parked out front.

Conover was dressed for what looked like a big night. He wore a relatively dark suit, a white shirt, and a more or less dark tie.

On anyone else the outfit might have been a little loud, but compared to Conover's earlier outfit it was almost somber. Shayne let the muscular man get about a block ahead of him, and then took up the tail.

Conover was not hard to follow. The evening traffic was light until they hit Collins Avenue. After that Shayne had to follow more alertly, but Conover made it easy by driving slowly and rarely making a turn.

When Conover stopped, less than two miles from his apartment, it was to pull into the parking lot of an isolated roadhouse. Shayne pulled in behind and saw Conover stride into the quiet establishment. The name was clear over the door: *The Red Mill*.

Shayne parked and followed Conover inside. Just inside the outer doors there was a small secluded bar to the left, and a large dining room directly ahead. Conover was in neither place. Which left only one place, the gambling rooms upstairs. Shayne knew it as well as every cop in Miami.

"Hold it, peeper."

The man on the door was small and slender and thin lipped. His name was Jaime Velaz. He could

do things with a knife no one but he had heard of, and he was Mario Ortega's bodyguard. Ortega owned *The Red Mill*.

"Just looking around, Jaime," Shayne said. He had never had any trouble with Ortega, who was relatively new in Miami gambling circles, having skipped Cuba a half a jump ahead of Castro's clean-living young puritans.

"I'll borrow the iron," Velaz said.

Shayne gave Velaz his automatic. The slender man frisked him deftly. Then smiled thinly. "Anything special you're looking for, Shayne?"

"I'm working, Jaime," Shayne said honestly. "Nothing to do with Ortega, and strictly non violent. I'm just watching a man."

"Okay. Go on up. I'll tell Ortega," Velaz said. "And just be nice. We'll be watching."

Shayne nodded and went on up the stairs through the hidden doorway. It was all part of the game. The police knew all about Ortega's place—gamblers were some of their best stool-pigeons—but protocol said that Ortega go through all the motions of hiding an illegal operation.

Upstairs there were two big rooms. One was for the thrill seekers: dice, blackjack, small roulette, one poker table. The second room was for gamblers: a serious roulette wheel; a silent and deadly blackjack game; and an elegant



baccarat game for the rich plunger.

Shayne wandered through the rooms until he spotted Conover. The muscle-man was totally intent on the blackjack game in the cheaper room. Conover looked like a different man—serious, intent, and without bluster. He did not even notice Mike Shayne stand near him.

Shayne watched him play for about a half an hour. Conover played well, was a few dollars ahead, and seemed interested only in the game. Shayne walked over to the bar in the corner of the cheaper room.

"Sidecar," he ordered.

As he was drinking his cognac-and-cointreau cocktail, he glanced at the door and saw the girl come in, the theatrical Jo-Ann. She did not see him, and he watched her make a bee-line for Conover. She touched his shoulder.

Conover looked up and scowled. She whispered in his ear. Conover turned back to the game and then

he grinned up at her and winked. She stood with her small, young hand on his shoulder.

Shayne saw a subtle change come over Conover. He seemed to begin to swagger even sitting down. He pushed his chips out with more abandon, seemed less nervous, less intent on the game. Shayne realized that with the girl there, Conover was playing a role, the devil-may-care man of the world.

"You concentrate when you work," a soft voice said in Shayne's ear.

He turned to see Mario Ortega standing beside him. The dark gambler was immaculate in a custom-made dinner jacket. There wasn't even a bulge. Automatically, Shayne glanced around to find Velaz and Ortega's other bodyguard. He saw them both casually a few feet off.

Ortega grinned.

"So I'm nervous. You sure pay attention. Conover, huh?"

"You pay attention, too," Shayne said. "How are you, Mario?"

"No complaints," Ortega said. "What's wrong with Conover?"

"Probably nothing. I'm just watching him."

"The old man?"

"What old man?" Shayne said casually.

Ortega laughed. "Okay. Play it cagey. With Conover it got to be some old man wants him tabbed."

"Tell me more."

"I'm giving you news? Conover's

got a way with the dames—there's some news."

"That depends which dame."

"Not with Conover. All the dames dig him. Don't ask me why. As far as I know the guy's a small-time punk one jump ahead of welching on a bet every week."

"No worse than that?"

Ortega laughed again. "I do your work, huh, and you get paid? Sure, Conover's gone over a couple of times, but he's no bad one. A wild bird but no teeth."

"Just plays the ladies?"

"And the odds," Ortega said.

"What about the girl?"

Ortega blinked. "What girl?"

"That one with him?"

Ortega looked. "Who knows? A girl. I seen her around. Under age, maybe, but she has the money to say she's old enough."

"She has money?" Shayne said.

"The way she spends it she better have."

Shayne looked toward the tall, slender girl. So Jo-Ann had money. Then what did Conover want with Sandra Piper? True love?

Ortega grinned at him.

"Thinking, Shayne? I never knew you peepers thought."

"Only when we have to," Shayne said.

"Don't work at it too hard," Ortega said, starting away. "You can pick up your gun when you leave."

Shayne nodded. Ortega strolled away with Velaz behind him. The other bodyguard remained, lean-

ing lazily against the bar. Ortega was too smart to leave even a private cop unwatched in his place of business.

Shayne had two more sidecars and then knew he had to eat. There was only one way out of the gambling floor, not counting emergency exits. He went downstairs and took a table in the restaurant from where he could watch the exit from upstairs.

He ate slowly, and the food was good. After coffee he had a cigarette. Conover did not appear. Shayne had a telephone brought to his table. He called Piper.

"Yes, Shayne?" the nervous man said.

"So far I haven't seen Conover do anything," Shayne reported.

"No? I noticed he did not appear today, and my wife is out with friends—legitimate friends, I'm fairly sure. Perhaps I have been hasty."

"You paid for three days. I'll stay on it a while."

"Very well, but I'm beginning to feel a bit foolish."

"That won't hurt you," Shayne said.

He hung up, grinning, and paid his check. He was about to go back up to the gambling rooms when Conover appeared. Jo-Ann was with him. They seemed in good spirits. Shayne followed them out.

It was more difficult following, now that it was dark, but he managed to stay behind Conover's car

until it parked in front of his apartment again. He waited until they were inside. Then he slipped into the courtyard.

The lights were on in Conover's apartment. There was a sound of giggling. Apparently the trouble of the afternoon had been forgotten.

After about a half an hour the lights went out. Shayne stuck to the stake-out for another hour. The lights did not go on. No one else came or went.

Shayne went home.

V

SHAYNE WAS BACK at the stake-out by seven o'clock the next morning. Conover's car was parked where it had been the night before. Almost as soon as Mike Shayne arrived Jo-Ann appeared, walking quickly. A cab drove up to pick her up.

Shayne settled down to his vigil. At ten o'clock Conover came out and got into his car again. This time Shayne trailed him out of Miami Beach across one of the causeways into Miami proper. At a downtown office building Conover pulled up to the curb and seemed to settle down to wait himself.

Just after noon Richard Piper came out of the office building. The slender businessman got into his car, an old Cadillac, and drove off. Conover followed. Shayne followed Conover. Like a procession, the three cars wound through the down

town traffic, and then out of the city to the south.

Just when Shayne was beginning to think that Piper was driving home for lunch, the client turned off into a private road that led up a low hill to an elegant country club.

Conover did not follow Piper into the club drive. Instead he pulled off into a roadside hamburger stand that almost faced the driveway.

Shayne passed on for about a mile, made a U-turn and drove back slowly. He parked at the roadside stand, but did not get out. A carhop appeared and Shayne ordered two hamburgers and coffee.

While he ate he watched Conover. The muscleman was doing no more than he was, eating lunch, but with his car facing the exit from the club.

At two o'clock Piper's old Cadillac appeared. Conover went off after it, and Shayne took up the parade again. Whatever Conover was up to, he did not seem to be worried about anyone tailing him. Which meant only that Conover was a thick-headed fool, probably.

The procession wended its way back to the downtown office building. Conover took up his watch, and Shayne took up his. Piper went back to work.

It remained that way all afternoon. Twice Conover got out of his car, and Shayne did the same, but each time it appeared that Con-

over was doing no more than stretching his legs. Shayne was at least thankful for that. Much more of this and he'd be paralyzed.

Sometimes the redhead, in the heat of an exciting case, forgot how much of a detective's work was spent in doing absolutely nothing but watching and waiting. Most of the time with very little idea of what he was waiting for.

At ten minutes to five Piper appeared again. Conover started his engine. Piper was carrying a small leather satchel. Shayne came alert. Piper had not mentioned that he carried money from the office, but the leather satchel had that look. Conover seemed very alert all of a sudden, too.

Piper climbed into the old Cadillac and drove off. Shayne waited for Conover to take up the chase. Once more the three cars moved as one through the city streets. The quitting time traffic was heavy, and Mike Shayne had more trouble keeping up. Twice he speeded up to be sure he didn't lose Conover, only to come too close at a stop light.

Even Conover might spot him if it happened again. Shayne made a decision. He speeded up and passed Conover. He fell in line between Conover and Piper's Cadillac. Unless Conover fooled him, it was just as good to follow Piper. He was pretty sure that Conover would not suspect anyone else to be following Piper.



Piper drove to a warehouse near the docks of Biscayne Bay. Shayne passed and parked a block away. In his rearview mirror he saw Conover ease to the curb near where Piper had parked. Shayne watched, ready to move if anything happened.

Nothing did.

After less than ten minutes Piper came back out of the warehouse and got back into his car. The leather satchel seemed much lighter, and Piper tossed it into the back of his Cadillac. Conover made no move. Shayne tugged slowly at his left ear as he watched the silent action behind him.

The procession started once more. Back through the city and all the way out south. This time Piper passed the country club and drove into an area of fine big houses along quiet, well-tended streets.

The businessman drove into a garage, got out, and went into the house.

Piper was home.

Conover drove on past the house without stopping. Shayne followed as far back as he could get in the deserted streets. He noticed that Piper's Cadillac was alone in a three-car garage.

Conover made a right turn, and Shayne took a chance. He was pretty sure to be spotted if he tailed Conover in the empty residential streets. He was logically sure that Conover was finished with whatever his purpose was. So he turned off and took different streets back to the highway.

He reached the exit gates of the residential area—Conover was not in sight. Shayne swore to himself. He had two choices: go back to Piper's house and see if Conover were maybe up to something, or go on to Conover's place on his hunch that the man was through for the day.

Mike Shayne was pretty sure that if Conover had had anything in mind about Piper this night, the muscle-boy would not have driven away so directly. He decided to head for Conover's apartment.

He was right. Conover's car was parked in front of the apartment again. Shayne parked and considered another decision. He now knew that Conover was following Piper. The question was why? And should he go on waiting until Con-

over made some move, or should he go in and try to scare the hoodlum off?

And in the back of his mind as he considered was that small leather satchel Piper had taken to the warehouse.

Was it a robbery ready to go?

If it was, his appearance again would probably call it all to a big halt. Conover would do nothing and be caught at nothing. Well, what was Shayne's obligation in this? To catch a crook, or to protect his client?

Despite his bloodhound instincts, the answer was obvious. He was not police; he could not be sure what was happening, and he did know that Conover was following his client. His duty was to scare Conover off, let him know that his play, whatever it was, was now known and dangerous.

Shayne stepped out of his car. Just as he did, another car pulled up in front of the apartment. Not exactly in front, perhaps fifty yards before the entrance. Later, Shayne could not be sure why he had quickly slid back into his car. Reflex, probably, the years of training to be always suspicious and alert.

A woman got out of the car. She leaned back in for a moment to talk to someone, and then turned and walked straight for the apartment entrance. She was a blonde, well set up, and about thirty-odd. There was something bold and

sensual about her walk toward the apartment entrance.

Shayne had a strong hunch he was seeing Sandra Piper.

He let her disappear into the buildings.

The car she had stepped from pulled slowly away. There was a man in it. Shayne frowned. As the car passed he took its license number.

Then he once again got out of his car and approached the apartment court.

VI

MIKE SHAYNE went up the stairs in the late sunlight as silently as he could. The door to B-6 was closed, but there were voices inside. One was a deep contralto woman's voice. Conover's voice seemed to be angry about something.

Shayne pressed against the wall close to one of the two windows. The voices were muffled but clear.

"He went to the club and the warehouse again, that's all," Conover was saying.

"You're sure. Just that, nothing more?" the woman's voice said.

"That's it, honey. Nothing else. He's a boy of real steady habits."

"Yes, I know. My clean-living Dickie boy. God, it's a bore sometimes. Who would have ever thought that Dick Piper—"

"To hell with Dick Piper," Conover snapped inside the room. "Let's get to us. You're sure he

doesn't know what you're doing? Where you are right now: that you're here with me?"

She laughed a nasty laugh. "So what if he knows? What will he do? He's used to me. I've got a long history."

"I'll bet you have, honey," Conover said. "Come here."

There was a rustling of sheer cloth inside the room. Shayne waited, but nothing more was said. The redhead took a breath, opened his coat to have his pistol at hand, and tried the door.

It was unlocked.

He took another breath and went in.

They were in the shadows of the room, on the couch. Conover leaped up with a violent curse. The woman sat where she was, her dress half up her legs, her eyes cold and unflinching.

"Who the hell—" Conover began, and then stared at Shayne. "You! I'll be damned!"

Conover's whole face was twisted with the effort of his brain to think. It did not take much thinking. Shayne inside the room now literally slapped Conover in the face with the simple fact that the previous visit had been no accident.

"You're tailing me!" Conover managed to get out.

"That's good thinking," Shayne said.

The woman said, "Who the hell is this, Dan?"

"Some character who's been tailing me!"

"Watching you, Conover," Shayne said. "Just watching you in action."

Conover clenched his fists, stepped toward Shayne. "Maybe you better watch something else, punk. I don't like snoopers hanging around me!"

Shayne stood easily, lightly on the balls of his feet. He watched the muscular Conover. His left shoulder swung toward Conover almost imperceptibly and lowered a fraction. Conover did not miss the change. The man hesitated.

Shayne smiled. "You're a busy boy, Conover. First Jo-Ann, now Mrs. Piper. You must have something."

If Shayne expected a reaction, he got it, but not exactly the reaction he had expected. Instead of a quick burst of anger, he got silence, breathing, and then a slow, careful smile from Conover.

From the woman he got a quick, alert attention. She sat up straight, pulled down her skirt to cover her very fine legs.

"Dick," she said. "Dick hired you."

Conover said, more to Mrs. Piper than to Shayne, "That's a gasser, ain't it? I thought Dickie boy knew all about you, baby."

"Shut up," Sandra Piper said, and her cool eyes watched Shayne. "You're lying. My husband wouldn't bother to have me

watched. Why would he? He knows all about me, and he knows he can have a divorce any time he wants it and is willing to pay for it."

"He didn't mention divorce," Shayne said. "Just that he doesn't like Conover there hanging around you. I figure it's Conover he wants out of the picture. He thinks you're playing out of your league this time, Mrs. Piper. Maybe I agree with him."

Conover smiled. "How much is it worth to him to have me out of the picture?"

"No pay-off, Conover," Shayne said. "Just a warning. He's on to you. So am I. You better go look for easier pastures. With your record, one shaky move and I'm down on you like a whole wall of bricks."

"What can you do?" Conover sneered.

"Hound you, friend," Shayne said. "I don't know what you've got in mind, but it's a hundred-to-one it's not just the lady's charms. Whatever you want, I'll be there to watch. Take off, punk. You're being warned."

Sandra Piper said, "So Dick thinks he can pick my men now? Why the dirty coward! You tell him I'll see who I like, and I don't care what he does! Maybe I'll just divorce him. Maybe I'm tired of him."

Shayne turned to look at the woman. "Is that what you're up to? Trying to get something on your husband? A divorce, with money,

and live happily ever after with lover boy here? Or maybe you have something more permanent in mind?"

"Dan!" she said suddenly.

Too late, Shayne saw the man swinging at him. There was no time to duck. He rolled and took the punch high on the head. It was a good punch. Even glancing off his skull it sent him back against a wall.

Conover came in, open for a combination. Shayne, off-balance, let himself go down. Conover's left dug a hole in the plaster wall. Shayne came up under the wildly adjusted right, and hit Conover with a short left in the belly.

Conover grunted, his legs gave, and he crab-walked backward. Shayne grinned. The muscle-man's belly was soft. He waded in and brushed away a weak right lead, countering with a solid right to the nose. Blood spurted and Conover went over the end of the couch in a flail of legs.

Shayne went after him. Conover's head was harder than his belly. He rolled off the couch and came up on his feet. Shayne took a left on the neck, and missed with his own combination. Conover kicked him in the knee, buckling his left leg.

A wild right missed Shayne's jaw.

On one leg, the redhead planted a left-right into Conover's belly again. Conover gagged and

doubled over. Shayne kneed the man in the face and got a yell of pain. The knee brought Conover up, still gasping for breath from the belly punches.

Shayne hit him left-right-left in the face. Conover went up and over like a sack of grain and skidded sprawling on his back. Shayne bent to pick the muscle-man up, his big hand on the man's collar.

"That's it, punk. Lay off, you hear?"

Conover glared up from his battered face, but there was something like fear in the man's eyes. The Piper woman stood against a wall, her hand up to her mouth, her eyes on Shayne.

The redhead turned on his heel and strode out.

VII

SHAYNE WENT DOWN to the courtyard and out to his car. He did not get into the car. Instead, he doubled back and around and went back into the courtyard through the side entrance. He hid in the bushes and waited.

After a half an hour Conover and Sandra Piper came out and crossed the courtyard. Conover had been patched up, more-or-less, and his face was grim with anger. Mrs. Piper followed behind him. Together they disappeared through the office.

Shayne went back up to the apartment, and let himself in with



one of the special keys on his key ring. He began to look over the apartment. He found little of interest. Conover seemed to live high, but thin. His closets held little that was not on his back.

The furniture had obviously come with the apartment, and there were few personal possessions. There was one well-kept .38 caliber revolver. It was wrapped in oiled cloth and inserted in a shoulder holster. There was a full box of ammunition, and the gun had not been fired recently.

There was plenty of whisky, mostly Scotch and of many different brands. When a man buys his own whisky he usually sticks to one brand; his favorite. The num-

ber of different brands made it pretty clear that most of the Scotch must have been given to Conover—presents from admirers, no doubt.

Shayne let himself out warily, but there was no one around in the early evening sun. He went down and back to his car. He drove back to his Flagler Street office.

Lucy Hamilton had her face on, ready to leave.

"No calls," she said.

"Okay, Angel. I want you to check out a license number for me first thing in the morning."

He gave her the license of the car that had driven Mrs. Piper to Conover's apartment. It was probably only some friend, but he wanted to have a complete report for Piper.

After Lucy left, he sat in his office and thought for a time, and then called Piper's number. There was no answer. Shayne frowned. Was it possible that Mrs. Piper was going to run off with Conover, now that she knew her husband had hired someone to watch her? Somehow it didn't seem likely. Conover was not exactly a catch on any permanent basis for a woman accustomed to decent living.

Shayne sighed and lit a cigarette. Whatever they did now was probably not his business. If Conover or the woman had had any big plans involving mayhem or money, Shayne's appearance should have ended them. All he had to do was

contact Piper and tell him that the mission was accomplished.

He was still thinking this, and had tried Piper's number twice more, when he heard his outer door open and close. Heavy footsteps crossed to his inner door. Shayne reached into his desk drawer and rested his hand on his office pistol.

The outer door opened.

"Mr. Shayne? Your door was open."

The speaker was a tall man, black as coal, with the deepest voice Shayne had ever heard. A giant of a man, at least six feet eight, perhaps two hundred sixty pounds. He had soft, hooded eyes, and wore a slim-cut pale gray suit of an Oriental type with a high collar.

"Come on in then," Shayne said with his hand still on his pistol.

The black giant entered, closed the door, and walked slowly gracefully to a chair. He inclined his head gravely and seemed to settle into the chair rather than sit. Then he sat, a small smile on his chiselled face, and stared at Shayne from cool, languid eyes.

Shayne waited.

Nothing happened. The giant did not speak or move his gaze a hair from Shayne's face. Finally, Shayne spoke.

"Did you come here for a reason, Mr.—"

The black giant simply inclined his head in what seemed to be an affirmative answer. Shayne took

his hand from his desk drawer and leaned back.

"All right, any time you want to tell me what you have in mind, I'll listen."

The slender giant smiled again, nodded, said:

"You are to come with me."

Shayne arched a shaggy brow. "I am? Just like that?"

"You will be paid."

"That's fine, only maybe I'd like to know where I'm going, why, to whom, and who I'm talking to."

"That is of no importance to you now. You will come and you will learn then. Is it not so?"

"What if I prefer to know what it's all about before I go?"

The giant shrugged delicately. "I am not instructed to inform you. Only to bring you. The rest will transpire."

Shayne shook his head, "No. I don't think I'll go anywhere, my friend, until I . . ."

He reached quickly for his desk pistol—too late. The small automatic seemed to materialize in the giant's massive hand.

"Have no doubt that I will use this if required," the black giant said.

Shayne leaned back again. "You won't use it. Someone wants to see me. Your boss, I figure."

The giant shrugged gently. "I shall not use it, of course, unless you attempt to use a weapon. In which case it would be necessary. Without a weapon, I believe you

must do as I say, or I shall be forced to exert physical pressure. Do you doubt that I can do so?"

Shayne was big, but there was something about this black giant that made him sense he would not be much of a match for the man. There was a liquid control to the giant's movement that hinted at both power and skill.

"Okay, I guess I go with you."

"Thank you," the giant said politely.

He stood up and motioned Shayne to precede him. There was something about the way the giant stood up, without gathering his muscles, without apparent strain or preparation, that showed his power.

As Shayne passed the man and reached for his panama, he considered making a move. He tensed his muscles.

It must have showed.

"Do not attempt it, please. You are to come with me, and you will come."

Shayne nodded without looking back. "I will come."

The giant marched him out and down in the elevator. The operator stared at Shayne and at the black giant. Shayne grinned at the operator. The giant did not appear to be aware that the operator existed.

In the street Shayne was herded gently to a long, black car of some make he did not recognize at first: In fact, he did not recognize it at all.

"Please," the giant said.

Shayne got in. The giant got in beside him. A miniature brown-skinned man started the car and drove off without one glance backwards. Inside the car Shayne realized why he did not recognize the make. The car was custom-made.

Someone had a lot of money—someone who had sent the giant to fetch him.

VIII

THE MANSION was completely hidden from the road. Mike Shayne had first realized that it was there at all when a break came in the high stone wall they had seemed to be driving beside for miles.

The stone wall itself was on a narrow side road off the main highway, some twenty miles west of Miami, toward the Everglades.

Ever since leaving the main highway Shayne had not seen a single house. There was a stone wall, then, finally, the break in the wall and a high gate. The gate opened automatically, and the big car drove through. They drove on for more than a mile through dense forest land that had been left in its wild state.

Then the house itself appeared in the light of the fading sun, and around it the strangest collection of trees Shayne had ever seen—trees from every tropical country in the

world. But the real surprise was something else.

As the car parked, and Shayne got out at the massive front steps of the sprawling mansion, three spotted cats appeared on the lawn. Shayne recognized them after a moment—cheetahs! Each had a collar on, and all three paced as they stared at him.

"You will enter, Mr. Shayne," the black giant said.

Shayne entered. The inside of the house took him full in the face as much as the cheetahs. There was a long entry hall floored with the striped, spotted and plain skins of large animals, and walled with spears, swords, knives, guns, maps and mounted heads from just about every major wild area of the world.

"Do you like my collection, Mr. Shayne?"

This man was about six inches shorter than the giant, which still left him bigger than Shayne, but a foot broader. He was dressed in chino trousers and a bush jacket. He had a drink in his hand, and all that was missing was the safari hat, a gun, and the beating of native drums.

"Come in," the man said. "You can leave us, Rani."

The giant bowed and vanished. The big man in the chino outfit led Shayne into a smaller, leather-furnished room which had even more spears and assorted cutlery on the walls.

"Drink?" the man said.

"A little brandy?" Shayne said.

"Fine."

Shayne stood as the man went to a well-stocked liquor cabinet and poured brandy from an unmarked bottle. He handed the small snifter to Shayne, and waved the redhead to a seat. Shayne sat. The man sat facing him. Shayne sipped the cognac. He did not know what it was, but he knew that whatever name it had he could not have afforded it.

"My name is Kurt Ammons," the man said.

Shayne drank again. His face did not show the effect of the man's simple announcement. But there was an effect. He knew the name of Kurt Ammons. Most people knew the name of one of the last big-game hunters, explorers, amateur naturalists, and expedition leader.

Kurt Ammons was the friend of presidents, and if not exactly a millionaire, a wealthy man.

"What do you want with me, Mr. Ammons," Shayne said. "This is good cognac."

"So they tell me. I don't have the palate myself. Twelve-year-old Scotch is about the best liquor I can appreciate," Ammons said. He studied Shayne. "I know all there is to know about you, Shayne, so we won't bother with any questions. I know you're an honest man, and you know who and what I am."



WILL GENTRY

"I don't know that you're an honest man," Shayne said.

"Since you won't have to trust me, that doesn't matter. But I have many questions about you, so it does matter in your case. Let's say you checked out well. Now, what have you been doing watching my daughter?"

"Daughter?" Shayne said. Then he understood. Sandra Piper would not be this man's daughter. "You mean Jo-Ann?"

"Yes. You didn't know her name was Ammons?"

"No, and I probably wouldn't have connected it anyway."

Ammons nodded. "Most people don't, which is good all around. I'm the kind of character most people think is either dead or at least never appears in the flesh. So I gather you are not watching my daughter."

"No."

"Then it's Conover?"

Shayne nodded. Ammons tented his hands. The hunter did not look happy.

"I have had difficulty with that person. I only discovered Jo-Ann's involvement with him some weeks ago. What do you think of him?"

"He's a punk."

"Dangerous for a girl?"

"That depends what you consider dangerous."

"I'm not old-fashioned, and Jo-Ann, as you probably have found out, is not exactly a shrinking violet."

"Then I don't think he's dangerous. She seemed to handle him well enough."

"Why are you watching him?"

Shayne shook his head. "I can't say. I have a client. It has nothing to do with Jo-Ann, as far as I know."

"I see," Ammons said, and stood up. He began to pace. "You don't feel this man can hurt her?"

"He'll probably bruise her ego eventually."

"That could be good. She has the morals of a sick cat."

Ammons began to pace. Shayne enjoyed his brandy. The big hunter seemed to be steaming inside. Shayne could guess what a man like Ammons would think of Conover, and the frustration of having a daughter and being unable to do anything to control her. It wasn't easy to be a father. Neither money nor power nor influence could keep a girl in line if she did not want to be kept.

"What I'm worried about, Shayne, is Conover's possible ac-

tions. Jo-Ann is a wild girl. Everything is kicks with her. This Conover strikes me as a punk and perhaps a crook. I don't want Jo-Ann to become involved in something she might not be able to handle."

"Why do you think Conover is a crook?"

Ammons paced on. "I've had him watched for some time. That's how I spotted you. So—"

"Not by that big fellow. I'm not that blind."

"Rani? Good God, no. Rani is a Watusi I met in Burundi a lot of years ago, and he became my friend and keeper. He stays with me. No, it was Shingar, my Gurkha assistant. He was the man who drove you here. He's been with me a long time, and he can follow anyone unseen and unknown."

"He certainly can," Shayne said.

Ammons paced. "Shingar got quite close to Conover many times, and more than once he heard Conover boasting to Jo-Ann that he would have money of his own soon. He told her they'd leave Miami—*shake the dust of this clambake burg* is the way he put it. I never met him myself, but I trust Shingar, and he says that in his opinion Conover talked as if he had some scheme for quick money."

"How much money?"

"I gathered quite a bit, at least to Conover," Ammons said. "I don't expect that would have to be too much, judging from his past history."

"Have you told Jo-Ann about this past history of Conover's?"

Ammons sighed. "Only part of it. She's one of those women who can't stand anyone telling them how bad a man is. Protection infuriates her, so I told her very little."

Shayne finished his brandy and looked up at Ammons. "What do you want me to do, Ammons?"

"Watch Conover for me. Catch him at something, anything."

"I'm already watching him. As for catching him, I'm only one man, and so far he hasn't done anything."

Ammons sat down, looked at space. "I guess what I want is for you to somehow protect Jo-Ann from herself. I can't seem to do it. I certainly can't interfere with Conover."

"I'd do that anyway, if I can," Shayne said. "Right now I have a client interested in stopping Conover and a lady from being too close. If I succeed, I'll probably drive him closer to Jo-Ann. But I may stop whatever his get-rich scheme was."

"When you succeed for your present client, will that leave you free to stop Conover for me?"

"Maybe," Shayne said. "I'll tell you what I can do. My job for my client may be over tonight. If it is, I'll stay on Conover's tail for you until I'm convinced he's not up to anything except chasing women."

He looked at Ammons. "If

that's all he's doing, I'll let him alone. You're daughter is single, and from what I've seen of her she's hell-bent for trouble. I can't stop that."

Ammons nodded. "All right. I'll have to accept that."

"Good," Shayne said, and stood up.

Ammons watched him. "I like you, Shayne. You're an honest man."

"Then have your Watusi drive me back to Miami. I'm not too happy with the way you got me here."

"I apologize. I merely sent Rani to invite you. He sometimes uses his own methods."

Ammons touched a bell and the black giant appeared like magic. Shayne realized that Rani had never been far away. He hoped he never gave the Watusi reason to have to protect Ammons. He did not think that Rani's methods would be slow or pleasant.

The trip back in the dark was as silent and uneventful as the trip out.

When Shayne reached his office he went straight to the telephone and called Piper. There was still no answer. He let the phone ring for a long time. Then he hung up and bit a fingernail. Where the hell was Piper?

He was on his way out of the office when his telephone rang behind him.

He grabbed it.

"Yes?" he said. "Shayne. Who's this?"

Silence, and then, "Shayne? I . . . need you. I . . . I'm hurt . . ."

Another silence. It was Piper!

"Where are you?"

". . . home . . . I . . ."

"Hold on. I'm on my way!"

He hung up and ran.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE skidded to a stop outside Piper's house in the silent residential section. Nothing moved around the house, but there was light in a downstairs window. He ran to the front door. It was open.

Inside he turned toward the opened door of the lighted room. It was a den, book-lined and comfortable, and Richard Piper sat in a high-backed armchair, his hand still on the receiver of the telephone.

"Shayne?"

Piper sat in the chair with his face bloody, his shirt torn, his suit jacket ripped down the front. Both his eyes were puffed and already darkening. His lip was split, and his right arm seemed to hang loose.

"What happened?" Shayne said, as he bent over his client.

There was no visible wound, nothing but the results of a fair beating. Shayne went over every inch of the man. Bruises, cuts, and possibly a broken nose, plus two puffed eyes.

"Conover," Piper said through

his thickened lips. "He came in here and—"

"Are you hurt anywhere I can't see?" Shayne snapped.

Piper shook his head, winced. "No. I'm all right, I guess. He was mad. He was terribly angry. She just watched . . . watched."

"Your wife?"

"Yes. Sandra. My—dear wife. She just stood and watched him beat me. I—I couldn't stop him. He was like an insane man."

Piper seemed to shudder as if cold. Shayne looked around.

"Where's the whisky?"

"In the living room. But—"

"Just sit quiet. What do you drink?"

"Brandy. I—"

Shayne went into the living room. He found the brandy in a cabinet behind a home bar. As he poured the cognac, a stiff jolt and one for himself, he noticed a large photograph behind the bar. It was a military unit, standing in proud line on a beach with cliffs behind.

Piper was clear standing out in front of one group. Almost all the men in the picture had some kind of bandage. The legend on a small banner held by one of the men read: *1st Ranger Bn.*

Shayne carried the brandy back into the den. He gave the large jolt to Piper. Then he sat facing the beaten man.

"Now tell me what happened from the start."

Piper drank the brandy and

seemed to stop shaking. He drank half of it in silence, and then he sighed wearily.

"I was here, of course. Sandra was not home as I had told you on the telephone earlier. I was wondering if I had finally panicked and made too much of her little . . . adventures."

Piper turned his puffed eyes toward Shayne. "I suppose I did, didn't I? Too much."

"Maybe," Shayne said. "Go on."

"Well, they came in. At first I thought it was only Sandra, of course. She used her key, and I was in here, and I called to her. She came in, almost white with anger, and Conover was with her."

Piper shivered. "I—I ordered him out of the house. They both just laughed at me. Only it wasn't exactly laughter. They were too angry. Sandra asked how dare I put a private detective on her trail. She said that this time she was sick of it, and to hell with my home and money and security."

"I protested. Then Conover hit me the first time. I was no match for him. He hit me and said he was going to teach me a lesson about sending hired snoopers after him. He said he'd been watching me to see what he could squeeze out of me for Sandra, but now he was too mad. He said he and Sandra were going to go away, and to hell with my money."

Piper stopped and seemed to be seeing something very far away,



perhaps as far as Sandra Piper had gone in his mind. His beaten face seemed wracked, not with hate but with sorrow.

"Then he beat me up. I tried to fight, but he was too good for me. I—I think I managed to hit him once, maybe twice. But it was no use. He seemed wild for revenge. He kept saying that a man who hires muscle should be more careful what he does. He said no one gets him beaten up and gets away with it. He told me to tell you he figured you and he were even."

"He was crazy with anger. I guess I was wrong—he really only wanted Sandra after all. I should

never have hired you. It's finished me. She's gone. Gone."

Piper covered his face with his hands. The big hands showed no marks at all. If Piper had landed any blows, they had not been very good blows. Through his hands Piper shuddered.

"He knocked me out in the end," he said, "when I came to they were gone. Then I heard the telephone ringing. I thought it might be you, but I wasn't sure. I thought then it might be Sandra, gloating. But when it stopped I was sure it was you, so I called your office. That's all of it."

Shayne watched the man with his big hands covering his beaten face. The blood had dried now. The brandy seemed to have helped the man.

Mike Shayne watched Piper, a small frown on his face.

"You don't know where they went?"

Piper shook his head. "They said something about a motel, I don't know where. Maybe they meant Conover's apartment. She . . . she took nothing with her."

"If she's leaving you, Piper, she'll send for her stuff when she cools down," Shayne said. "Do you want to go to a hospital?"

"No!" Piper cried. "No, not a hospital. I called my doctor, Dr. Rhett. He should be here soon. I'm all right, actually. I was hurt worse in the war more than once."

"Rangers, right?"

"First Battalion. Good friends, good men."

"Yes," Shayne said. "I'll wait until the doctor comes. What do you want me to do now?"

Piper blinked at him. "Now? Nothing, I suppose. What is there to do? If he wanted anything more than Sandra, it doesn't seem like he wants it now. They wouldn't have attacked me so openly if they planned anything else, would they?"

"Probably not. You could press charges. Assault at least. Conover has a record of assault. It might go hard on him."

Piper shrugged. "What good would it do me? I was wrong, Shayne. And I've lost her." Piper looked at him. "You could go and find them, see if she's all right, at least for now."

Shayne nodded slowly. Piper was playing true to form—the weak sister. *Never mind me. See that my wife is safe even if she cheated, lied, put me through hell, and stood by while I was beaten.* And it looked very much like Conover was up to no more than taking away a man's wife after all. And yet—

Something smelled somewhere. What about the big-money deal Ammons' Gurkha had heard about? Shayne was still thinking about this when Piper's doctor arrived. He left the doctor working on Piper and walked back to his car.

With another assault charge in the wind, he doubted that Conover and the woman would be holed up at Conover's apartment. But with a punk like Conover you could never be sure. He might just think it daring to go back with the woman.

X

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE drove up to the garden apartment complex this time, Conover's car was not parked out front. But there was a car he recognized, Jo-Ann Ammons's small foreign sports car.

Shayne parked and went into the dark courtyard. There were lights in many of the apartments even at the late hour. And there was a light in the windows of apartment B-6!

Shayne started across the courtyard, moving cautiously. It was crazy, but could Conover be keeping a date with Jo-Ann while he was supposed to be going far and permanently with Sandra Piper? Knowing Conover anything was possible.

But before he could get half way across the courtyard the lights in B-6 went out. Shayne stopped. He watched the dark door above. It opened so slowly and cautiously he did not see it move until it was open and a shadow slipped out.

Shayne moved quickly.

He glided across the courtyard like a big cat. On the balcony above the shadow of a man crossed



lighted windows. The man reached the foot of the stairs before Shayne did. There was a bright light at the foot of the stairs.

"You! Hold it!" Shayne called out.

The man froze, and Shayne saw him clearly. It was not Dan Conover. The man was medium height and heavy and not young. Maybe fifty. He wore a well-cut grey business suit, and his handsome face was tanned. He wore a thin greying mustache. A heavy ring gleamed on his left hand.

But it was the eyes that Shayne stared at. Caught under the light by Shayne's call, the man's eyes were wild, hunted and tense. Worried eyes, even scared, like the eyes of a man who has been running from something for a very long time.

For one instant the man froze, and then his left hand snaked into

his pocket and came out with a gun. Shayne dove for the cover of the fountain in the court. There was no shot. Shayne looked up.

The man was running fast and straight out of the courtyard. Shayne went after him, but the man had gained his time, and when Shayne reached the street the man had vanished.

A car started only fifty feet away. Shayne ran for it, but it pulled away before he could do more than grab for a door handle and miss. He sprawled in the street. The car vanished in the night.

Swearing, Shayne got up, dusted himself off and turned back for the court. This time he crossed swiftly and went up the stairs to B-6. The door was locked. It had one of the normal spring locks. Shayne got out a thin, stiff piece of plastic and inserted it against the spring lock. The lock clicked open easily.

Shayne went into the room and closed the door behind him. He switched on the lights. The room was bare and stripped of the few personal items he had seen on his last two visits. He checked the refrigerator. It was full. Conover had left in a hurry.

He stood in the room and looked carefully around to see if he could tell what the strange man had been doing. But he could see nothing—until he looked at the floor near the couch.

A dark stain covered the floor. Shayne got down and examined

it. Blood, still not quite dry. He stood up slowly and looked around. The door into the bedroom was slightly open. He drew his automatic and pushed the door open.

Jo-Ann Ammons lay on her back on the bed, her dead eyes fixed on the ceiling above. She lay as if she had been thrown down, one slim leg dangling grotesquely to the floor. Blood covered her chest. She had been shot twice in the chest by some small caliber pistol. There were no exit wounds.

The gun the nervous man in the courtyard had displayed was a much larger caliber. Shayne estimated that Jo-Ann had been dead more than an hour.

He made a careful search of the bedroom and found nothing. Conover's clothes were gone, so was the .38 Special. He found nothing to indicate where Conover might have gone. He called the police.

Lieutenant Bellows of Homicide was the first to arrive with his men and the technical squads.

"Let's hear the story, Mike," Bellows said.

Shayne told him everything, including his talk with Ammons. At the mention of Ammons, Bellows seemed pained.

"That's all of it, George," Shayne said. "You know as much as I do, which isn't much. I guess you better pick Conover up on an assault charge at least. I'll make the complaint."

"It looks like we'll want him for

more than assault, from what you say," Bellows said grimly.

Chief Gentry himself arrived an hour later. Bellows reported that the technical men had turned up nothing that looked useful. Gentry was worried about the Ammons angle.

"The papers'll have a field day with Ammons in the picture," the gruff Chief muttered. "You working for him, Mike?"

"Not officially, and I'm not going to tell him, Will. I just couldn't do it."

Gentry nodded. "I know. I never get used to it. But that's my job. All right. We'll put out an all-points on Conover. You can be sure we'll get him."

The medical examiner stood up, wiped his hands, and turned to Gentry. The M.E. looked pale.

"I always hate it when they're so young," the M.E. said. "We're a hell of a rotten breed, we humans."

"Yeh, Doc," Gentry said. "What's the story?"

"Dead about two hours, maybe less. Two pills in the heart, close range but straight shooting. They look like twenty-two longs. I'll tell more after I get her downtown."

The M.E. and his men packed up Jo-Ann Ammons for her last trip. Gentry scowled and looked at Shayne and Bellows.

"You say it was a thirty-eight Special you saw here?" Gentry asked.

"Yes," Shayne said. "He could

have had belly gun, a sleeve persuader."

"He could have," Gentry said.

Bellows said, "It's a woman's gun, a twenty-two."

"Yeh," Gentry said. "We better put out a pick-up for Sandra Piper, too."

Shayne left them working. They were all depressed. Jo-Ann had been young and pretty.

He drove home and when he sat on the edge of his bed for a last cigarette he suddenly realized how tired he was. It had been a long, tedious day. But not as long as Jo-Ann Ammons's day.

Before he went to sleep he saw the face of the man who had come out of B-6 where Jo-Ann lay dead. The face—and a license number on a car that had delivered Sandra Piper to the apartment earlier.

All at once he had the hunch that the two were connected. He had not mentioned the license number to Gentry. He had forgotten it. Now he remembered.

XI

FOR THE FIRST time in years Mike Shayne was in the office the next morning before Lucy Hamilton. He rummaged in her desk and found the license number. He called his reporter friend Tim Rourke at the office of *The Miami Daily News*....

Lucy came in with two eyebrows raised high. Shayne waved her to

silence, and she stood watching, a worried expression on her face.

"Hi, Mike," Rourke said from the other end of the line.

"I need a quick favor, Tim."

"Shoot."

"I want you to use your contacts to get me the owner of a license number."

"Can do," the lean reporter said. "Give it."

Shayne gave it, and then hung up. Lucy's brown eyes watched him.

"Something urgent, Michael?" his secretary asked.

"I don't know, Angel," Shayne admitted, and told Lucy of the events of the day before.

While he waited for Rourke to get him what he wanted, he called Piper. The telephone was answered at once.

"Yes? Oh, Shayne."

"Are you okay?"

"No serious damage," Piper said. "The doctor gave me a pill and I slept fine. I look a mess, but I can work."

"Has your wife contacted you?"

"No. I doubt if she will. At least, not for a time."

Shayne told Piper about the murder of Jo-Ann. For a long minute Piper was silent.

"You—you think it was Conover? Murder?"

"Conover or your wife."

"Sandra! Never!"

"Piper," Shayne snapped. "Nothing foolish, you hear? If she con-

tacts you, tell me or the police. At once."

"Yes, of course. What's going on, Shayne?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out," Shayne said grimly and hung up.

Ten minutes later Rourke called back. He had the facts:

"It's a gray Buick, registered to Andrew Kirk, 1220 Manor Road."

"Thanks, Tim," Shayne said.

He called Gentry to find out if anything had happened over night. The Chief was not in, but Bellows told him that so far there was no sign of Conover or the Piper woman. Ammons was offering a large reward for the capture of the killer. The hunter was sure it was Conover.

Shayne went down to his car. Manor Road was a long street on the west side of the city—a good, new but not rich area. Shayne found 1220 set back from the road by a wide lawn that seemed to have been neglected in recent years.

The door was opened by a tired-looking woman in a shabby wrapper that did not seem to fit in with the house or the neighborhood. She looked at Shayne without alarm or much interest.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Kirk?"

"Yes," she said, and just waited.

"Is your husband at home, Mrs. Kirk?"

"No."

It was as if the woman's mind

heard but did not respond. She seemed to have no curiosity about what Shayne wanted or who he was.

"May I come in, Mrs. Kirk? I want to ask some questions about your husband."

She blinked. "About Andrew? Why?"

"I'm a detective, Mrs. Kirk, and a case I'm on—"

Her mouth opened. She licked her lips. "Detective? You mean police?"

"No, a private detective. I—"

She stepped back. "Come in."

She turned and walked into a dark, shaded living room. Shayne followed her. She sat down, lit a cigarette, and looked up at Shayne with no indication that she cared whether he sat down or not.

"What's he done?" she said. "Is it that woman?"

"What woman?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, but I know there is one. He's even got a damn love nest. He calls it his office, his studio! He always wanted to be a sculptor, so he rented this damned studio! Look at this place, and he rents a studio! I know it's a woman."

"But you're not sure?"

"I'm sure, but I can't prove it, if that's what you mean," Mrs. Kirk said, and looked hard at him. "Are you working for her husband? Is she married, too? That would figure. Andrew Kirk, the frustrated genius! Damn him!"



"Where is he now, Mrs. Kirk?"

"At work, I hope. At least he can do his job. He's got us so far into debt we'll never bale out."

"Where does he work, Mrs. Kirk?"

"Art Imports, Inc. He's a junior vice-president. Almost fifty and still a junior! Him and his damned dreaming!"

Shayne sat in a kind of trance-like silence. The woman did not notice. She was too busy with her bitter thoughts. Art Imports, Inc.! The same . . .

Shayne leaned toward the woman.

"You're completely sure he's at work?"

"Hell, no. How can I be sure? He came home late last night, and he was gone before I got up. We don't share the same room. We haven't for a long time."

Shayne took a breath. "Mrs. Kirk, I'm going to ask you to do me a favor. Check and see if any of your husband's things are missing."

"Missing?" she said, blinking.
"You mean . . . you think—"

She was up and off like a shot. Shayne had to walk fast to keep up. She climbed the stairs and tore into a large bedroom at the end of the upstairs hall. She looked around, ripped open drawers and closets, and went through the room like a raging cyclone.

She faced Shayne. "Yes, his precious camera and his damned ascots are gone! Some other personal junk. One suitcase, a small one. I never noticed."

"Nothing else?"

"He always said he hated everything else."

"You say he was in debt?"

"Up to our necks!"

"Where is this studio of his?"

She gave him the address, and then, suddenly, her hands went to her throat, and she slumped onto the bed. "He's gone? He's left? No, he—"

She began to cry. Shayne had no time to comfort her. The image of a small leather bag was looming up in his mind like a mountain he had been staring at but had not seen.

XII

MIKE SHAYNE pulled to a halt in front of the office building where he and Conover had kept their vigils the day before. He ran into the building and up to the elevators.

"Art Imports?" he barked.

"Tenth floor," the starter said:

A receptionist greeted him on the tenth floor. He asked for Kirk. The cool blonde passed him on to an older man with the face of a prune.

"What do you require with Mr. Kirk?"

"I want to see him. Now!"

"Well, I'm afraid—"

"Give me someone who isn't," Shayne snapped, and flashed his credentials. "Police business. Now give me someone who knows which end is up!"

They gave him to a heavy-set man with the title of vice-president on his door. "I'm Mr. Tuttle. What do you want with Andy Kirk?"

"Mike Shayne," he said, "and I want to talk to him. First, I want to see him."

"So do I," Tuttle said. "He didn't come in today. I just called his home and he's not there. He didn't tell us he would be away. Are you the detective Mrs. Kirk said was just out to see her?"

"That's right. Is Kirk often out like this?"

"No."

"Was he handling a lot of money?"

"No," Tuttle said. "Should we check our office money?"

"What does Kirk look like?"

Tuttle swivelled in his chair and pointed to a photograph on his wall. It was a group picture, one of those company shots taken at clambakes and such. "Kirk's the fourth from the left in the front."

Shayne walked to the picture. It was the man he had seen last night coming out of apartment B-6.

"You better count your money," Shayne said. "Do you keep much cash around?"

"A great deal. We make purchases from small South American merchants—from ship captains, sailors, all that. They like to deal in cash."

"Is that what Piper was carrying in the leather bag yesterday?"

Tuttle gaped. "Piper? Are you interested in Dick Piper, too? He was quite badly beaten last night, it seems."

"I know, I was there. I can't explain it all now, but Piper started it off. I wasn't sure he was coming in today. Maybe I better talk to him while you start counting."

"He's out at the moment. It's a morning purchase day."

Shayne narrowed his eyes. "Purchase?"

"Yes. The same place he took the money yesterday. It's a routine matter. We have to make a deposit with the traders in advance, and—"

"How much?"

"What? Oh, about \$50,000. It's for six month's distribution in South America. You see, we finance the trips when we're looking —"

Shayne was not listening. The redhead was trying to piece it out. Conover's shadowing, Kirk's obvious involvement with Mrs. Piper, the beating of Piper last night,

What if that beating had been only a cover, an attempt to turn attention away from any ideas other than Conover and Mrs. Piper being lovers?

"Call the police," Shayne said to Tuttle. "Chief Gentry personally, and give my name. They can get to Piper faster than I could. Tell Gentry I'll be in touch."

Shayne turned for the door just as the telephone rang on Tuttle's desk. The vice-president answered. His face went pale. He listened, said, "Yes, yes. Call the police. I'll be right there."

Tuttle hung up. "Piper's been robbed. All the money. Just outside the warehouse."

"My car's outside," Shayne said.

Tuttle didn't move. "Piper says it was two men. He thinks one was Conover. Who's Conover?"

"I'll tell you on the way."

XIII

WILL GENTRY and his men were there at the warehouse as Shayne drove up. The redhead hurried into the warehouse and was directed to the office. Gentry stood smoking his black cigar above the bruised and bandaged Piper.

Piper saw Shayne. "This isn't my week."

Sergeant Tomas of Robbery was going over the warehouse and street outside.

"He was knocked out again," Gentry said to Shayne. "It hap-

pened about an hour ago. They dragged him into a corner in here and he only woke up about ten minutes ago. He says one looked like Conover. He didn't see the other."

Piper said, "Do you think that was what Conover was planning all along, Shayne?"

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" Shayne said. "I thought that when he found I was on to him he'd pull out, but—"

"But maybe he needed quick cash to run out on a murder rap," Gentry said. "Then he had to pull the robbery—after the Ammons girl was killed."

"The beating of Piper was all an act," Shayne said, "and it worked. It threw me off."

Gentry eyed Piper. "You're sure there were only two, and both were men?"

"Yes, I'm sure . . . wait," Piper said, thought. "There were only two, and both men, I'm sure, but I didn't see any car. I mean, they must have had a car, right? For their escape? So maybe a third was in the car, and —" Piper looked up at them.

The businessman blinked at them. "Sandra? Oh, no. She couldn't be involved! She couldn't be that stupid!"

Gentry motioned to Shayne. The redhead walked off a little distance with the Chief while Sergeant Tomas took up the interrogation of Piper. Gentry scowled.

"It sounds to me like the woman was in on it. They took him like they knew all about him and his habits."

"They did," Shayne said. "I'm not sure that today was supposed to be the day."

"You think killing the Ammons girl made them move?"

"That's what I think."

"What about the third man?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a man from Piper's own office, Andrew Kirk," Shayne said, and explained what he had discovered during the morning.

"Inside, eh? It has the sound. But why would they have Conover shadow Piper if Kirk knew the whole inside schedule?"

"I figure he didn't know the route, Will, and Kirk planned to be in the office when it happened. But my showing up somehow messed everything up. The Ammons girl was killed, and they had to move in a hurry."

"Now I'm in a hurry," Gentry said. "I want them and fast."

"Then let's go," Shayne said. "I've got one lead." He told Gentry about Kirk's 'studio' love-nest—and maybe hideout.

"Come on," Gentry growled.

They took Gentry's car and crossed the city in a scream of sirens. The address was in a rundown section of the Bay area on the northern edge of town. Mostly old stores and shabby apartments, not skid row, an artist's section.

Gentry muted his siren as they neared the area, but he could not hide his car, and on the noon-time sidewalks the wary non-conformists turned to stare and then slid quietly into the shadows. Gentry glided up to the quiet four-story apartment where Kirk had his studio.

"It's the second floor," Mike Shayne said.

They looked up. The shades were all drawn down on the windows of the second floor. Gentry sent one of his men around to the rear, stationed another in front. Then he led the way in and up the rickety stairs, with Shayne and his third man behind him.

On the second floor landing they listened.

There was no sound.

Gentry motioned his man to take up a position to the left of the door. He silently sent Shayne to the right of the door. Then the Chief looked at both men. They nodded. They knew what to do, what had to be done. It was the routine.

Gentry himself braced against the landing railing, held his pistol ready, and kicked the door open.

The wood splintered like paper and the door flew open.

Gentry jumped in, crouched low his pistol ready in front of him.

Shayne and the other detective jumped into the room and dove for cover left and right of the door on the inside.

It took a matter of a second, per-

haps less, and the room was completely covered.

An empty room.

There was no furniture, nothing but masses of stone and metal, pedestals, tools, welding equipment, cameras, and all the other accountaments of a sculptor. A kitchenette was grimy and unused at the rear. Three unfinished statues stood in the barren room—one was that of a full-blown nude, lush and soft and not young.

"Mrs. Piper," Shayne said in a whisper, nodding to the statue.

Gentry did not answer. There was a door across the room, an two closets. Gentry ordered with motions of his pistol: Shayne to the left closet; the detective to the right closet. Gentry himself went to the bedroom.

The closets were empty. The bedroom wasn't.

"In here," Gentry said.

She lay sprawled on the floor of what was a sparse and shabby bedroom. She wore a traveling suit, but she would not go anywhere now. Her bare and exposed legs looked colder than the statue of her out in the main room.

"Sandra Piper?" Gentry said.

"Yes," Shayne said.

He looked around the dingy love-nest. A faded couch with springs broken out at the bottom. A narrow studio couch stained with some dark fluid. Some chairs. Nothing else.

Gentry bent over the body.

"Shot. Not a twenty-two caliber. A lot bigger. Looks like a forty-five automatic. She was choked, too. You can see the marks."

"Chief," Gentry's man said.

The detective held a small, pearl-handled automatic. Gentry took it on the pencil in its barrel and sniffed.

"Fired. A twenty-two caliber, Mike."

"It probably killed Jo-Ann Ammons," Shayne said.

Gentry looked slowly around the scene. "He choked her. She broke away, so he shot. One straight in the head."

Shayne nodded. "It reads that way to me, too, Will. A fight, a falling out, and bang! The old story."

"Which one? Kirk or Conover?"

"I don't know for sure."

Gentry nodded to his man. "Get everyone over here. Go over this place like a horde of ants! I want some lead to this!"

Shayne looked slowly all around the grubby studio. His gray eyes were points, and he stroked at the stubble on his jaw.

"You don't need me for a while, Will," Shayne said.

Gentry looked at him. "No, not for a while, Mike."

"I'll see you later, then," Shayne said.

He walked out with Gentry's eyes boring into his back. The Chief knew that he had a hunch, but it was not something he could talk to a policeman about.

If he was wrong he could be aiding a murderer.

XIV

THE RED MILL in sunlight looked like any other good restaurant doing a brisk lunch business. Mike Shayne parked in the crowded lot, and strode in. Jaime Velaz stopped him at the door leading to Ortega's upstairs office.

"Action doesn't start until later, Shayne."

"Mine started," Shayne said. "I want to see Ortega."

"Tell me, Shayne. That's the way we play it here."

"I'll tell him myself."

"About what?"

"Nothing big, Velaz," Shayne said. "I just want to ask him about Dan Conover."

"Mr. Ortega doesn't know anything about Dan Conover, or about anyone else," Velaz said.

"Then I'll be wasting my time. It's my time," Shayne said. "Look, Velaz, I won't be asking Ortega about anything he has to tell me. I just want to lay a proposition to him, and let him do what he wants about it."

Velaz thought, then nodded. "Okay, Shayne. Come on, but leave the iron."

Shayne left his automatic, and Velaz led him upstairs to a small office down a corridor from the gambling rooms. Ortega sat behind a Spartan desk, working over

mounds of papers like any busy businessman.

"Shayne wants to talk to you, boss," Velaz said, implying by his tone that he, Velaz, considered the idea all right.

Ortega smiled easily. "Sure. Sit down, Shayne. Any luck with your job?"

"That depends what you mean by luck," Shayne said.

"Okay, okay," Ortega said, still smiling. "I don't expect I want to know anyway. What can I do for you?"

Shayne glanced at Velaz. Ortega frowned, then looked thoughtful, and nodded to Velaz:

"Take a break, Jaime."

Velaz hesitated. "Okay, boss. I'll be checking the tables."

Ortega nodded, and waited for Velaz to leave. Then the gambler opened his desk drawer, took out a fat cigar, lit it, and blew smoke with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Okay, Shayne. What is it?"

"How well do you know Dan Conover?"

"Why?"

"I got the idea, thinking about it, that you knew Conover pretty well."

"Let's say I know him. He's a punk, and I don't much like him, but I know him."

"Is he a killer, Mario?"

Ortega blew smoke. "That would depend. If he was in a bad enough corner, maybe."

Shayne leaned forward. "I don't



think so, Mario. I don't think Conover would kill under any circumstances. I think he might fight, beat someone up, threaten, get hard, try to scare, but I don't think he'd ever do anything."

"So?"

"So the police are after him for assault, robbery and a double murder. I don't think he's guilty of the murders, or of setting up the robbery."

Ortega was silent. The gambler smoked and seemed to be seeing something very interesting on the far wall above Shayne's head.

"Why come to me?" Ortega said at last.

"I think you could get a message to Conover."

"Why do you think that?"

"Let's say I've heard rumors."

"What rumors?"

"That you still have contacts in Cuba. That you can get people to Cuba if you want to."

"Why would I want to?"

"I wouldn't know that, Ortega."

Ortega considered Shayne. "Let's say I know ways to get people to Cuba. I don't know Conover, and I wouldn't help a punk like that. You're wasting your time, Shayne."

"Like I told Velaz, it's my time," Shayne said. The redhead stood up. "Okay, you don't know Conover, you don't have any contact with him. Let's say you have a wide circle of friends, business associates. If you want to help a punk who's got a double murder rap hanging over him, you could get a message to him."

Ortega considered his cigar. "If I happened to run into anyone who might know where Conover is, what would the message be?"

"That Conover come to my apartment tonight. I'll be alone. No cops, no witnesses. I'll be unarmed. He can trust me or not, but maybe I can help him."

Ortega laughed. "That's some message for a guy on the run from a double killing. You're crazy, Shayne."

"Maybe. But if he's innocent, what's he got to lose? Even if he runs, and makes it, he's got the cops on his tail the rest of his life. He faints at shadows. Conover wouldn't like to live that way."

"You're setting yourself up for an aiding a fugitive charge, Shayne," Ortega said.

"I'll risk it."

"You must think Conover's clean."

"I do, and I want to catch the real killer. I don't like smart killers who think they can get away with it."

There was a long silence as Ortega smoked his cigar. His face was impassive, nothing showed in his eyes. Minutes ticked away. Shayne could hear voices out in the gambling rooms as if from a long distance. Ortega stood up.

"I don't know where to contact Conover, and I don't know anyone who does. In fact, I know nothing."

"Okay."

"I don't mess with fugitives, innocent or guilty."

"Okay," Shayne said, waited.

"Go home. Take a rest. Have yourself a quiet evening alone."

Shayne nodded. He turned and walked out of the small office. Velaz materialized before he had gone a step. The bodyguard handed him his automatic.

Shayne drove home.

XV

AT SIX O'CLOCK Mike Shayne called Lucy Hamilton and told her to go home.

At eight o'clock he had his dinner sent up—a filet, very rare, potatoes au gratin, asparagus, and coffee. With the coffee he had four fingers of the best Martel.

He read for some hours. The city was loud all around him out-

side the windows. Voices talked far away in the apartment, and somewhere a woman was giggling over and over.

He read, and the sounds of the city slowly dwindled as the night turned into the small hours of the morning. The woman had stopped giggling. A hushed silence seemed to hang over the apartment-hotel, broken only by the coughing of a man somewhere, and the quiet steps of homecoming revellers.

At two o'clock he went to bed. He did not place his pistol where he could reach it. He went to sleep, thinking that even if Ortega got the message to Conover it was a hundred-to-one against Conover buying his help.

Then, Conover could be guilty after all, and if the muscle-man were guilty he would not come to visit Shayne.

Still thinking the whole case over in his mind he fell asleep. He did not know he had fallen asleep. It seemed to him that he was still lying there with a cigarette thinking about the case when he heard the noise.

Soft, like the step of a cat's foot wrapped in velvet.

Awake, and aware that he had been asleep now, Shayne sensed someone in the room. He waited patiently.

The footsteps moved about the room lightly, searching. The intruder was checking out the place. Shayne let him check from room to

room and then return to stand near the bed.

He felt hands touching him, going under the pillow, and was aware of a shadowy figure above him in the dark. The drawer on his bed table opened and closed. Then the figure went away, and there was a creaking as someone sat down in a chair.

"You awake, Shayne?"

Shayne said, "Yes. Some light?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

Shayne switched on his bed lamp. Dan Conover sat in an arm-chair facing the bed. The thirty-eight Police Special was in his hand. His other hand was in the pocket of his gaudy sport jacket.

But there was nothing, gaudy about Conover now. The muscle-man seemed to have aged ten years. His face was gray under its tan, his eyes were red from fatigue, and dark circles haloed the tired eyes. His whole face was drawn, sagging with strain.

"You wanted to talk to me," Conover said. "I should have pegged you for a peeper from the start."

"You didn't know it was going to be murder, Conover," Shayne said.

Conover shivered. "No, I didn't know that."

"You didn't kill them?"

"No," Conover said. "You wanted to see me. I'm here. What's the pitch?"

"Don't get tough. If you didn't

want help, you wouldn't be here."

Conover shifted the pistol in his hand. His eyes seemed to bore through Shayne. Then he sighed.

"I want help. I never figured this bad."

Shayne sat up, lighted a cigarette. "Okay. Now tell me the whole story."

"Okay. I'll take the robbery rap, you understand? I mean, I'll make a deal with the cops, come clean and plead guilty on the robbery if they make it easy. I don't want no part of murder."

"I can't make deals for the cops. I'll listen to the story, and I'll talk to Gentry. That's my offer."

"Yeh," Conover said. "Well, he come to me, this Kirk guy. He was ready to do a big run-out with this Piper dame. They had a big thing going, only he needed some loot to make the run—a lot of loot. But he needed a guy to tail this Piper joker to get the whole routine."

"I mean, Kirk knew when a big shipment was being set up, and when Piper would have big cash, only he didn't know Piper's outside routine. He wanted to be in the office for an alibi when the heist was pulled. He had to be clear or it was all up, see? So he never contacted me personally; he always sent the dame."

"So you weren't playing games with her, you were setting up the robbery?"

"That's right. We was supposed to wait until Kirk spotted a real big

payment Piper would carry. It all went smooth as silk until you showed up. I should have figured something was bad, but you played it smooth. I never tumbled that you was on to me when you busted in on me and Jo-Ann."

"But something happened?"

Conover looked at the floor. "Jo-Ann got to wondering. She was a nutty kid. She figured I was mixed up in something because she spotted your iron under your coat. So she come around to see what she could spot.

"She was hiding in my pad when me and Sandra Piper come back from beating on Piper."

Shayne broke in. "You beat up Piper to throw me off? To make it look like a love affair between you and Sandra?"

"Yeah," Conover said. "Why didn't it work?"

"It almost did. It was the shooting of Jo-Ann that gummed it all up."

"You can say that again," Conover said. "She was in my pad, and she heard me and Mrs. Piper talking about the whole plan. The Piper dame lost her head and shot Jo-Ann before I could stop her. She beat it and I got out of there fast. I figured it was all off, but Kirk said no."

"Kirk went to check," Shayne said. "I guess he figured there was some time after he checked out your place."

"He did. He said there were no

leads, but the cops would be after me for sure. I knew he was right. So we changed the plan. We needed money fast. We decided to pull the heist the first chance and not wait for a real big payment.

"Kirk figured it didn't matter any more that he was in the office, with the murder we were all in too much trouble. So he waited for Piper and trailed him and we hit at the warehouse. We ran with the loot. Kirk took it to split later. I hid out."

"Sandra Piper drove the getaway car?"

"Hell no. She was waiting for Kirk at his studio."

"You didn't go to the studio with him?"

"No. We split up right after jumping Piper. I didn't know nothing about Sandra getting killed until I heard it on the radio. I didn't have no hand in either murder, so help me. I'll take the robbery rap. I'll tell it all if they let me plead to a reduced charge."

Shayne nodded. "I'll do what I can, but you have to tell me one more thing. Where do I find Kirk?"

Conover shook his head. "I don't know. We've got a meet set up for a couple of hours, only he probably won't be there after killing the Piper woman. I figure he got real scared about Jo-Ann's murder and decided to take off with all the loot. He can have it."

"Where is this meeting?"

"The Lemon Tree Motel, out at

the edge of town. We was to meet at six this morning."

"All right," Shayne said. "Now I'm going to call Chief Gentry. I'm going to say you surrendered to me. I'll tell them you didn't kill anyone. They'll come and pick you up. I'm taking your gun and leaving a man here with you."

"I'll stay alone. I ain't going anywhere. The best chance I've got is you on my side," Conover said. "I run now, I'll have every trigger-happy cop in the world looking for me. No thanks. I'll take my jolt and smile if you get me off the murder raps."

"I'll try," Shayne said grimly.

He dressed and called Gentry. The Chief was annoyed, but at least Shayne had picked up Conover. Then Shayne called Pete on the desk and had him come up and hold a gun on Conover, just to make it look good to the police.

Then he left for The Lemon Tree Motel.

XVI

SHAYNE PARKED IN the dawn light a quarter of a mile from the motel. He had driven past it once. All had seemed quiet.

He left his car off the road in a grove of palms and walked to the motel. A sleepy man sat behind the office desk. The man eyed Shayne suspiciously.

"I didn't hear you drive up, mister."

"I didn't want you to," Shayne said. "I'm looking for a George Moses."

That was the name Conover had told him Kirk would be using. The clerk got more suspicious. His small eyes seemed to stare at the faint bulge of the automatic under Shayne's coat.

"What about?"

"You wouldn't want to know," Shayne snapped, and showed the clerk his credentials.

"So?" the clerk said.

"So it's a murder case, and we could wait for the police, but Moses might get away, and then how would you stand with the cops?"

The clerk paled. "Murder? You mean this Moses is a killer? In my motel?"

"He could be. Now tell me where to find him, and then duck."

The clerk told him. Cabin 12. Shayne went out into the dawn light. He surveyed cabin twelve from a distance. The car in front of it was not the same car he had seen Kirk drive earlier. It wouldn't be. Nothing seemed to be moving in or around the cabin.

But Kirk would be ready. It was 5:30 now, and Kirk would be expecting Conover soon.

Shayne worked his way around behind the other cabins until he was close to Cabin 12 but hidden by a corner of Cabin 11. He studied Cabin 12. The two rear windows were closed and the shades drawn. Shayne crouched low and

made a dash for the corner of the cabin.

Flattened against the wall, he listened. He thought he heard someone moving toward the front of the cabin. He crawled under the windows and around the building until he found a window with the shade up.

Carefully he eased himself up until he was looking in the window. His automatic was in his hand. There was no light inside the cabin, but the room was small, and the dawn light filled it with a gray glow. A single bag stood packed on the bed. A man stood at a front window looking out. He held a pistol, and his face was tense and anxious in the morning light.

It was Kirk.

Shayne studied the rest of the room that he could see. There was no one else in the room. Shayne raised his automatic and smashed the window.

Kirk whirled.

Shayne's automatic was aimed steadily straight at Kirk.

"Don't try it, Kirk!"

Shayne's voice seemed to echo loudly in the silent dawn.

In the room Kirk hesitated, his pistol aimed half down at the floor. His face and muscles tensed as if to raise the pistol.

"You can't make it, Kirk. There's a fugitive warrant out on you. I can gun you down in a second."

Kirk seemed to tremble with inner struggle. Then his face went to

pieces. The gun lowered. Kirk slumped into a chair.

"Let the gun drop," Shayne said. "Kick it away."

The pistol fell to the floor. Kirk sighed, kicked it away. Shayne reached in through the broken glass and unlocked the window. He climbed in and crossed to where Kirk sat watching him now.

"You're the man I saw at Conover's apartment last night," Kirk said. "The man Sandra met at Conover's."

"Mike Shayne," he said. "I'm a private detective."

"Private?" Kirk said, stared. "How—"

"It doesn't matter how I got into this, Kirk; I'm in it. The police want you for robbery and probably murder. Maybe I can help."

Kirk jumped up. "Murder? No! No you don't! I didn't kill them. Sandra killed that girl! The stupid fool had to shoot her!" Kirk began to pace the room in the slowly brightening light of the morning. "She panicked, lost her cool head! That damned fool Conover couldn't stop it!"

Kirk looked at Shayne. "It was a good plan! It would have worked. No one would have suspected me, and then, later, Sandra and I—"

"It could never have worked, Kirk! It was a dreamer's idea. You and Sandra, that was it all along? The money and Piper's wife?"

Kirk nodded. "Yes, Sandra and I have been in love for some time."

"Then why did you kill her? Because she had killed Jo-Ann? You wanted all the money and no problems to hold you back?"

"I didn't kill Sandra! She was dead when I got back to the studio! Dead!"

"Tell me your story from the beginning," Shayne said.

Kirk sat down, covered his face. "You seem to know most of it. After Sandra killed that girl of Conover's, I knew we were in trouble. I—I was going to call it all off: the robbery, Sandra, all of it. Then I realized that that would mean the end of my last chance to be free. It would mean back to my wife, that house, the office, all of it. I had to be free!"

Kirk laughed bitterly. "Now I'll go to prison, but, you know, in a way that will be freer than I've ever been. Prison isn't a cell, it's twenty years of doing what you hated doing, of obligations you never wanted. Maybe they'll even let me do some sculpting in prison."

"Get back to the story, Kirk," Shayne said coldly.

"What? Oh, yes. I decided to go through with the robbery then and there. Later I could dump Sandra if I had to. So I waited out front for Piper. No need to hide now: sooner or later someone would find me through Conover after the murder of that girl. All I wanted was enough money to run far and fast."

"It all went off smoothly. I spotted Piper coming out with the bag. I



followed him long enough to know he was going to the warehouse; then I went and joined Conover and we waited for him. He walked right into it like an unsuspecting lamb, the weak fool. Didn't even put up a fight.

"After we hid him we split up and I went back to the studio. I went up. I was elated. I was sure no one could suspect me yet, Piper hadn't seen me. I had the money. I'd take Sandra with me until I was safe at least. I—I went in and found her there."

Kirk shuddered. "I suppose, in a way, I loved her. I was going to dump her because I had to be free, but I did love her. And there she was—shot! Dead! I ran. I just ran out!"

"What else could I do? I didn't know who had killed her or why. All I knew was that there were now

two murders and that I wasn't going to have my freedom after all. I was going to be caught. I was right."

"Do you have any idea who killed her?"

"I've tried to think," Kirk said. "I just can't. There's Piper, of course, but why would he kill her? I mean, after all these years why kill her now, because of me? There were all the others."

"Did you see anyone around, following you?"

Shayne was thinking about Kurt Ammons and the invisible Shingar and the Watusi giant. Revenge was a strong motive. Love was another.

"No," Kirk said, and looked up. "You mean someone who knew she had killed that girl? Yes. That has to be it, doesn't it? A lover, a friend, a father."

Shayne went and picked up Kirk's gun. It was a .32 caliber revolver. It had not been fired recently. Shayne put it into his pocket.

"All right, Kirk. Now tell me exactly what happened after Mrs. Piper killed the girl."

"She came to me, of course. They both did. To the studio. That was when we decided we would go through with the robbery after all."

"And?"

"I went to Conover's place to be sure there was nothing that would lead to us. Then I returned to the studio. Conover had gone to some hideout. Sandra stayed at the studio. She couldn't return to Piper; she was supposed to be running

away with Conover. Early this morning we started the robbery."

"So Sandra was at your studio last night, and stayed there this morning waiting for you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about the robbery once more."

"Well, I waited in front of the office-building for Piper. When I saw he had some money, I followed him until I was sure he could only be going to the warehouse. Then I went straight to the warehouse to be there before him and join Conover, who was already waiting there. He was—"

Shayne waved the man to silence. He was thinking hard. He rubbed furiously at his gaunt chin.

"All right, go on. Every detail."

"Well, we waited hidden at a spot Conover said Piper always passed. It was out of sight from anywhere but the alley behind the warehouse. We waited, I'd say, about a half an hour, and then he came. We—"

"All right," Shayne said. "That's enough. One more thing, Kirk. Who knew about your studio?"

"No one but my wife."

"You're sure? What about Sandra? Conover?"

"Well, yes, of course they knew."

"How long had Sandra been coming there?"

"Almost a year, off and on."

"And when did you start to work with Conover?"

"Only about a month ago."

Shayne stood up. "Is the money here?"

"Yes."

"Get it."

Kirk got the small leather bag. He looked at Shayne. "You'll turn me in? I suppose that's—"

"No, not yet. Kirk, what do you think your chances of having your story believed are? By the police? By a jury?"

Kirk paled. "You believe me?" he said.

"I do, but that's because I have a hunch. The police won't have the same hunch, and a jury wouldn't believe you for five minutes. No, you'll go over for killing Sandra, with Conover testifying against you. Unless—"

"Unless?" Kirk cried.

"Unless we catch the killer."

Kirk was silent. His broken face watched Shayne. Finally he said, almost inaudibly, "We?"

"I need you to set a trap. I can't make it work alone."

"A trap?"

"A dangerous trap, I think. We're dealing with a smart, hard, deadly man trained to kill."

Kirk was silent again. The man shivered. Then he slowly, very slowly, shrugged. "What else can I do."

"Nothing," Shayne said. "If we make it, I'll try to have them go light on you, too."

Kirk nodded. "I—I only wanted to be free. I never meant to hurt anyone."

"Let's hope no one gets hurt," Shayne said grimly.

XVII

THE BIG HOUSE in the quiet residential section was dark—except for one light still burning in the downstairs study even while the morning sun was coming up outside in the streets. Shayne eased out of his car and motioned Kirk to follow him.

They moved through the bushes to the side of the house. Shayne found a window open at the far rear of the house. He climbed in first. Kirk followed. They moved like shadows through the dim morning rooms toward the study at the front.

The door from the living room into the study was open. Shayne could see the form of a man slumped asleep in a leather chair, an almost empty bottle of whisky on the table beside the chair.

Shayne whispered to Kirk, "He's been drinking. That might give us the edge. He'll be tired, on edge, nerved up. Now go in and say what I told you to say. Keep him covered. Watch him. I'll be right here."

Kirk nodded, swallowed. The man's hands were shaking, but he drew his revolver and stepped into the room. Shayne watched Kirk walk shakily up to the figure in the chair.

Kirk was three steps away when the man suddenly sat up.

"Who—"

Kirk aimed his revolver. "Just sit still, Piper."

Richard S. Piper slowly sat up straight and his battered face came into a shaft of morning sunlight. He stared at Kirk. Shayne watched and saw what he had expected. Piper was a different man as he looked at Kirk, and at Kirk's gun.

"What do you think you're doing, Kirk?"

"I'm coming to get a killer," Kirk said, as Shayne had told him to say.

Piper didn't move. "A killer? That's you, Kirk. You or Conover, I don't care which. I'm surprised the police don't have you."

"Are you?" Kirk said.

"I'm getting up, Kirk. Shoot if you want."

Piper stood and walked boldly to the window. He did not even look back at Kirk. In the shadows Shayne smiled grimly. At the window Piper looked carefully all around. He went to two other windows. Then he walked back to Kirk. He stopped four feet from Kirk.

"They'll catch you, Kirk. You'll go to the chair."

Kirk said, "You knew, didn't you, Piper? How long have you known it was Sandra and me?"

Piper smiled. "Long enough, Andy, long enough. I'm surprised you didn't realize I would find out. I always found out about her men."

"And you knew about the studio."

"Of course. You were pretty

clumsy. Most of her lovers were, they discounted poor, weak me. After a while it became fun to know I knew. I mean, didn't you sometimes wonder if I was watching it all? Well, I was."

Piper reached into his pocket. "Cigarette?"

Kirk had jumped. Now he nodded. Piper took out a cigarette and lit it. "Don't be so nervous, Andy. Oh, I had you pegged. Then Conover appeared. Now that I didn't figure. Something was odd, you know? I mean, Sandra always was faithful to one cheating lover at a time."

"So you had Conover followed."

"I did indeed. It wasn't hard for me to guess what you were up to once I knew what Conover was doing."

"You went to the studio last night after Conover had beaten you," Kirk said. "You knew Sandra was there today."

Piper's face darkened. "She was going to leave for good; I could see that. Once I realized you planned a robbery, and were going to run, I knew she was going with you. She was going to leave me!"

"So you shot her," Kirk said.

"No one leaves Dick Piper! Cheat, okay. I'm no saint. But leave me after all she's put me through? And with you? No, not that!"

Piper laughed. "She almost fainted when I walked in. I took her throat. I squeezed. I don't

know, Kirk. Maybe I wouldn't have killed her. She was a disease, a hypnotic spell on a man.

"But she broke loose and grabbed that toy pistol I had given her years ago when I taught her to shoot. I—I have reflexes when a gun is brought out at me. I never lost the training. I shot. My old .45. I don't miss."

"That's why you were late at the warehouse. Almost a half an hour," Kirk said.

"Yes, that was—"

Shayne barely saw Piper move. Kirk never did see the slender man make his leap.

Piper moved like a trained cat, incredibly fast and precise. He gripped Kirk's gun hand, forced it up and out like the arm of a child, and kicked Kirk's feet out from under him all in one motion.

Kirk started to go down. Piper held him up with one hand, helpless, feet scraping for a hold. Then Piper jerked and Kirk seemed to fly toward Piper. Piper caught Kirk around the chest, and suddenly bent Kirk back while still holding the gun arm. There was a sharp crack and a scream of agony. Kirk's gun arm dangled broken. The gun fell. Piper pushed Kirk away and chopped Kirk's neck once.

In another choked scream Kirk fell to the floor and lay still. Piper smiled, hardly breathing hard. He bent for the pistol. Shayne stepped out.

"No!" Shayne barked.

Piper froze half bent. Slowly he straightened up.

"Neat, quick and hard," Shayne said. "That took a lot of training, Piper, and plenty of practice since. They must have been proud of you in the army."

"Yes," Piper said. "They were." The man looked at Shayne without expression. "I should have realized you set this up. A neat trap. I'm getting slow in the thinking."

"You think pretty fast, Piper. That was a pretty good weak man and coward act you put on. How many of your wife's lovers did you manhandle?"

"Quite a few," Piper said.

"Why, Piper? Why play the weakling for her?"

Piper shrugged. "Because she would have left me if I'd been strong, tough. She was like that. What good did my training do in holding her?"

"Did you love or hate her?"

Piper shrugged. "Both, I suppose."

"And when she was really going to leave you killed . . ."

Piper fell, rolled, and gone!

Shayne, gun in hand and facing the man across the room, still could not react in time. Piper dropped like a stone, and with incredible skill and strength rolled and literally hurled himself behind the desk with his leg muscles alone.

Shayne's shot struck wood from the desk. Then the redhead jumped sideways to get a shot behind the

desk. Piper came up from behind the desk. A .45 automatic was in his hand. Shayne fired, and missed!

Piper did not even blink as the bullet tore the cloth of his suit. Shayne dove for cover.

Piper fired and something slammed into Shayne's left arm.

His gun dropped.

He lay on the floor, on his back, struggling for the cover of a massive chair. Piper grinned, stepped toward him with the .45 levelled.

Shayne clawed for his own gun.

Unaware of anything but the pain of his broken arm, Andrew Kirk staggered up just as Piper fired.

The bullet hit Kirk in the chest and hurled the man backward against the wall.

Shayne had his gun and, his teeth grinding with the pain in his arm, reached the cover of the chair. He raised up. His gun braced on the back of the chair.

Piper leaped sideways and dived through the window in a shower of smashing glass.

Shayne staggered across the room. Out in the sunlight Piper was running. Shayne leaned on the window.

Then he turned and swayed to the telephone to call the police.

XVIII

SHAYNE LAY in the hospital bed. Lucy Hamilton held his hand. Will Gentry swore at him.

"I should have your license for this!" Gentry raged. "Next time you have a hunch, you better tell me!"

Shayne shook his head. "You had nothing on him, and he'd have never cracked to you or me. Only Kirk could have made him talk, Will. He figured Kirk was in so much trouble he could kill him and get away with it."

"Kirk may not live, Mike."

Shayne shook his head again. "There was no other way, Will."

Gentry chewed on his cigar. "Okay, maybe. You broke it, and maybe we wouldn't have. I'd never have figured Piper. How the hell did you figure it?"

"The Rangers, Will. That was the start. Piper was a Ranger in the war. It didn't fit with his weak coward act. I fought with Conover. Conover is a punk. He couldn't fight a stumblebum. A man with Ranger training should have broken him in two. Piper let Conover work him over? Why?

"After that I figured Piper had to know that Kirk was the real man in his wife's life. That meant he had some other reason for hiring me. It was to figure out what Conover was doing. When I realized Sandra Piper was alone at that studio, and that Piper had been a half an hour later at the warehouse than he should have been, I had him."

Gentry nodded. "And we'll get him. He'll never get out of the city. He'll join Conover and Kirk in jail, if Kirk lives."

But Gentry was only half right. Richard Piper did not get out of the city, but he did not join the others in jail. He joined his wife and the unlucky Jo-Ann Ammons in the grave. When the police caught up with him he turned his gun on himself and shot once. He did not miss.

"It figures," Shayne said after he got out of the hospital and Gentry told him. "He was a tough soldier."

"He was crazy. Why hire you, Mike?"

"He had to find out what Kirk and Conover were planning," Shayne said, "and he couldn't do that himself and still pretend he was a weak coward whose wife could do almost anything. I expect all he planned was to break it all up. But when he realized she was actually leaving him, he flipped."

"Hiring you was his big mistake, Mike. It always is."

"No," Shayne said, "his mistake was loving, or hating, Sandra too much. It twisted him, Will. He finally snapped."

"Yeah," Gentry said. "He snapped."

The Rangers sent a wreath to Piper's funeral.

It was for the man he had once been.

Killer of babies, despoiler of women, Vincent Coll raped and looted and killed without mercy until even hardened gang lords sickened of his blood hunger and feared for their own lives. Until, one day, Dutch Schultz phoned his pal, Al Capone.

"I need a guy killed, Al. Fifty G's. Okay? Meet—"

VIOLENT VINCENT COLL: MAD DOG OF THE UNDERWORLD

by DAVID MAZROFF

ON JANUARY 7, 1932, Al Capone received an urgent long-distance phone call in his headquarters in the Lexington Hotel on Michigan Boulevard and 22nd Street in Chicago.

The call came in on his private line, a line checked daily for taps by an electrical wizard who was on Capone's payroll expressly for that purpose. The caller was Dutch Schultz, notorious New York gang leader, boss of the Bronx and Harlem and current king of the big town's rackets.

At the moment, Schultz was afraid, as much as any man would

be who was being stalked by a maniacal killer.

"Al, this is Dutch."

"How're yah, Dutch? How's things in New York?"

"Kinda hot. I got a contract. Kinda tough. Fifty G's."

"Can't hear you," Capone replied. "Did you say fifty G's?"

"That's right, Al."

Capone whistled. "Must be really tough. Can't be that punk Coll, is it?"

"That's him," Schultz said. "I'll need about four or five or six of your best boys."

"I don't think so. But if that's

A TRUE CRIME Story of a Vicious Hoodlum



what you want it's okay with me. When?"

"As soon as I can arrange things at this end, I'll give you plenty of time. A week enough?"

"Sure. All they'll need is the time to get to the airport and to fly to New York. You arrange for accommodations and the car. I think two cars. I'll send Jack McGurn and four others. That will take care of your boy."

"Good enough. I'll call you the minute I want them here."

"Dutch—"

"Yeah, Al."

"Jack McGurn comes higher. I suggest you give him a little present. Personal like."

"Okay, Al. Five G's?"

"Yeah, that'll do it. You call me when you're ready."

VINCENT COLL, the man Dutch Schultz wanted rubbed out, was born in County Kildare, Ireland in 1908 to Peter and Margaret Coll. He was the youngest of three children. His sister Florence was the eldest, then came Peter, Jr., two years Vincent's senior.

The family was poor, hard-working, honest. They were devout Catholics. Both parents died shortly after Vincent was born and Florence struggled to take care of them, then decided to take them to America, the land of promise where the streets were paved with gold—the traditional belief of all Europeans, especially the poor.

Florence found a cold water flat in the infamous West Side of Manhattan around Hell's Kitchen. It was one of the worst slum areas of the city, peopled by dollar whores, pimps, thieves of every kind. A veritable cesspool of crime and vice; where the cops patrolled in twos and threes for protection.

New York's police department was predominantly Irish and Democratic. It was also shot through with corruption.

The Irish contingent of hoodlums at the time counted Vannie Higgins, Owney Madden and Jack "Legs" Diamond among others. They paid off to the cops, from the patrolmen on the beats to as high as they could go, and they went high.

Vincent Coll learned all this at an early age, as he learned about the prostitutes and the thieves. He had known poverty as a child in his native Ireland, and he knew it now. He took to theft.

There are many ways of being an ugly, conscienceless s.o.b. and Coll was invested with all of them by the time he was ten years old. Auburn-haired, blue-eyed, with a slightly crooked nose, thick lips, a strong jaw and chin with a dimple in the middle, he was not entirely unprepossessing.

Strong for his age, bright, hard, and cruel, he learned to use his fists with the skill of a professional pug. In company with Peter he beat up all the kids in the neigh-

borhood, took their pennies, nickels, and dimes, and dared them to report him to either their parents or the cops.

Coll's thievery included pilfering from candy and grocery stores, from pushcarts, rolling drunks, snatching purses.

Worried over her brothers' ways, Florence moved from the seething Hell's Kitchen to the East Bronx, a neighborhood inhabited mostly by Germans and Irish—hard-working, honest, but hard drinking too.

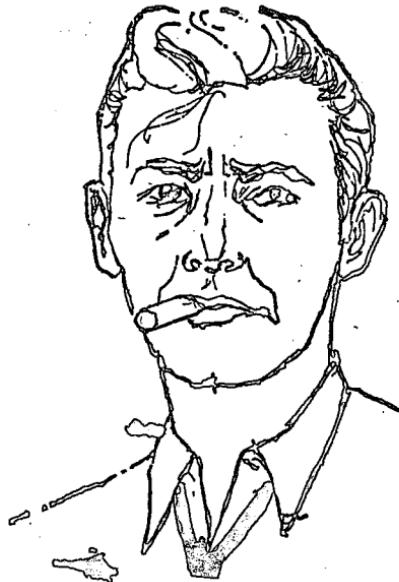
It was an ideal locale for young Vincent. He rolled the drunks, snatched purses from the women, stole from any store where he could enter, engaged in dozens of burglaries. He would steal anything that wasn't tied down, and that included milk left in hallways, bread, packages delivered by mailmen or deliverymen.

The public schools refused to take him, and when he was fifteen he had been before so many children's court judges he was virtually a resident. One judge with an ironic sense of humor never opened his court until he inquired if Master Vincent Coll was present and would the bailiff "please bring the gentleman before the bar."

It drew a laugh but it wasn't funny.

Florence pleaded with each judge each time Vincent was haled into court.

"Please, Your Honor, give him



MAD DOG VINCENT COLL

another chance. He's an orphan. He's had no mother or father since almost since he was born. I'll look after him. I'll do my best. I'll put him into a Catholic school."

She did. She registered him in the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin but the sisters couldn't control him and he was listed as an "intelligent but unruly and disorderly child."

Florence then put him into a Protectory, where the discipline was a lot stricter but not strong enough to control him. He then was placed in the House of Refuge, and from there he went to the Elmira Reformatory.

In the reformatory he received

his full education as a thief and robber, gunman and killer. He stabbed a Negro convict, did time in the hole, emerged tougher than ever, a swaggering, bold, ruthless thug without a single redeeming quality.

Paroled from Elmira, he obtained a pair of brass knucks and a pistol and took to heavy work, robbery, mugging, slugging, and rape.

Parents shuddered when they saw him on the street and pulled their daughters into the safety of their flats and bolted the doors. Wherever he walked, wherever he stood, there havoc lived, full force and ugly. He took up with an tough youth named Frankie Giordano. Together with his brother Peter the trio continued to ravage the neighborhood.

They broke up the crap games of the kids in the street and picked up all the money. No delivery truck was safe from their depredations. No woman walking home at night could call herself safe until she was home.

Prohibition, the greatest evil of the Twenties and early Thirties, had become a law and illegal beer and liquor flooded the city as well as the rest of the country. Dutch Schultz, who wasn't Dutch or German but Jewish, one of the few gang leaders of his race, followed a short time later by Louis "Lepke" Buchalter and Jake "Gurrah" Shapiro of Murder Inc.,

was the big man in the Bronx in the late twenties when Vincent Coll was twenty-one years old.

Coll took a sharp look at Schultz' fleet of trucks, breweries, the gang he bossed, and the other rackets that Schultz controlled, and decided he wanted in. The Bronx was as much his territory as it was Schultz' and he had as much right to a slice of the profits it yielded as did the Dutchman.

"We'll ask for a job first," Coll said to his brother and Frankie Giordano," and after that we'll see what we can do about taking over."

"You kiddin'?" Peter asked. "The guy's got an army. Some real tough guys. They'll murder us!"

"Yeah," Frankie agreed, "how we gonna fight a guy like the Dutchman, Vinnie?"

There was a flame deep in Coll's light blue eyes which seemed to turn them darker as he spoke.

"We'll do it," he said in a low tone. "Once we get in with him we'll do it."

SEVERAL DAYS later, Vincent Coll sought out Dutch Schultz in his headquarters located in the rear of a plush saloon. He was expensively dressed, smooth, with that intangible aura about him which bespoke the raw courage and brittle-like hardness of the experienced hoodlum who has no regard for human life and very little more for his own. In a certain

type of hood this was all facade but in as many it was as real as hard and cold-tempered steel.

"So you wanna work for me, eh?" Schultz said, and looked his young visitor over with a calculating eye. "Vincent Coll. Yeah, I've heard a little about you."

"Sure," Coll replied, "so has a lot of other people. I'm a pretty able guy, Mr. Schultz."

"Too able, from what I've heard. I mean, you're a little too quick with your fists and with a few assorted weapons."

"I use what I have to when I have to. Ain't that the way it's supposed to be?"

"Not all the time. First, I wanna tell you this. There is certain rules you're gonna have to follow, see? I got my territory, and Owney Madden's got his, and Ciro Terranova's got his, and we don't cross over. That way we keep peace in the family, see?"

"Sure. Why not."

The slight smirk which twisted Coll's mouth told Schultz his visitor was taking his words too lightly.

"I don't think you got me, Coll. If I put you to work I mean for you to do just as you're told, and what I'm telling you is that as long as you'll work for me you're gonna respect the territory boundaries. You just stay inside your own backyard, see?"

"Don't go out on your own on any kind of caper, like maybe heisting a load here and there that

might belong to Madden or Terranova. If you do that, you're gonna wind up in a world of trouble."

Coll was about to retort that trouble was his partner but he held his tongue. Instead, he spread his hands in an agreeable gesture.

"Mr. Schultz, whatever you say that's what I'll do," he said. "You're the boss."

These last words almost choked him, for already he was laying plans in his mind on how he would declare himself in as a partner instead of an employee.

"Okay," Schultz said, "see that you don't forget it. I'm putting you on the payroll for a hundred a week. To start. Do like you're told and you'll get a little more consideration."

He looked Coll over again. "Them's pretty expensive duds you've got on. Maybe a century a week won't deliver too many of them to you, but I'm telling you again not to go out on your own. On anything, see?"

Coll smiled broadly and thought, "Stop me, you creep." Aloud, he said, "I'm giving you my word, Mr. Schultz. You give the orders and I follow them. Uh—I have a brother. Pete. And a partner, Frankie Giordano. Both good boys. You can use them? I give you my word they'll do like you say. Good boys, Mr. Schultz. They can work with me. Anything you want done we'll do it."

Schultz thought a moment. He

had heard about the Coll brothers and Giordano. They were tough punks. Having them work together as a team might not be a bad idea.

"Okay, send them in," he said.
"I'll wanna talk to them."

"Like to me, Mr. Schultz?"

"Sure. I want an understanding."

"I can save you the trouble. I'll run it down to them, just like you was talking to them yourself."

"Yeah, sure. You just do that. Okay, they're on the payroll. Pete Coll. Frank Giordano. You come in with them at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Here. I'll tell you what your first job is. Meanwhile, I'll let out the word that you guys are working for me. That will take a little cop heat offa you. And don't put any on, from now on."

"Sure, Mr. Schultz. Just like you say. No heat."

Coll took a taxi home, aglow with the plans formulating in his mind, thoughts that would have made Schultz squirm. Coll's code of ethics did not include the time-worn phrase of "Honor among thieves."

He was a megalomaniac, harder, tougher, smarter than Schultz. And Madden and Terranova too.

He located his brother Pete and Frankie Giordano in a pool room.

"We're working for the Dutchman," he said, and smiled broadly. "All three of us."

"That's great!" Giordano exclaimed. Giordano, the disciple and

follower of his young master, a follower because he feared Coll's temper and fists, the deadly violence which lay just beneath the thin veneer of the false calm he presented.

"What do we do, and how much do we get?" Pete asked.

"A yard a week," Vincent answered. "What do you do?" He grinned crookedly. "You take orders from me. And my orders come direct from the Dutchman. We are supposed to stay out of trouble, not step out of bounds, not heist any beer trucks or whisky loads that belong to Madden or Terranova."

Coll spat on the floor. "That's what *Mr. Schultz* said." He uttered the words "*Mr. Schultz*" as if they had colored the air with a foul stench. He waved a hand in a mock gesture of clearing the space around him of the odor.

"*Mr. Schultz*," he repeated, and this time it was a contemptuous sound. "We'll take him over. And Madden and Terranova too."

Giordano stared at Coll with awe in his eyes, took a backward step and stared anew at the man he admired and feared. "Geez, Vinnie—"

Coll ignored him. "Come on. Let's go. We got a little piece of business to take care of tonight."

The night's business involved breaking into a speakeasy, taking away some hundred bottles of bootleg booze, a cash register, a

floor model radio, and large oil painting of a nude which Coll admired.

When Coll, his brother Pete and Frankie Giordano reported to Schultz the next morning the Dutchman said, "Somebody broke into Hans Gruber's speak last night and carried out the joint. You hear anything about it, Vincent?"

"No, not a word, Mr. Schultz," Coll replied blandly. "I was in bed at eleven o'clock. Me and Pete." He turned to Giordano. "How about you, Frankie?"

"Me too. I went to bed about eleven. Like you told me to do, Vinnie."

Coll shrugged, spread his hands innocently. "No dice, Mr. Schultz. We ain't heard a thing."

Schultz' mouth tightened into a straight line. "Gruber is one of my customers. I protect my customers. That's why they buy my stuff. If you hear anything you tell me. I want the bastards that broke into the joint."

He slapped the palm of his hand down on the desk. "That's one of your first jobs, Vincent. Get me a line on the guy that did this. An extra century if you bring me the name or names of the guys that did it."

"Sure, Mr. Schultz. We'll nose around and try to find out who did it."

"Okay. Now here's a list of some speak owners who don't like my stuff. They're buying from some



DUTCH SCHULTZ

alley brewers, guys who make their booze in bathtubs. It's poison. Gives the whole business a bad name. You guys go talk to them and change their minds."

Coll clacked his tongue. "*Tsk tsk.* How can they do such a thing?" He raised his hands ceilingward in a mock gesture of horror. "I guess we'll just have to rid these establishments of their vile liquids, eh, Mr. Schultz?"

Schultz forced a half-grin to his face, grunted. "Sure, you just do that little thing."

"Come on, boys," Vincent said. "We're on an errand of mercy."

As the three went out, Schultz turned to Fats McCarthy, his chief

lieutenant. "That kid Coll worries me. I can't put my finger on it but he just don't add up somehow."

"Well," McCarthy replied, "you think about it, and when you get the answer you let me know about it and we'll subtract him from the problem."

Schultz thought about that for several moments and when he got it he jabbed McCarthy in the ribs and laughed aloud. "Say, that's pretty good, Fats. Pretty good."

THE FIRST PLACE Vincent, Pete, and Frankie called on was a speakeasy that once had been a grocery store on Westchester Avenue. The windows were blacked over, as was the door.

Vincent knocked three times, softly, and waited. In a minute the door opened and a short, stocky man in his late forties appeared.

"Yes?" the man asked.

"We just moved into the neighborhood. On Boynton Avenue. Big Al said we could get a drink."

"Big Al? I don't know any Big Al."

"Sure you do," Coll answered and pushed the door hard against the man's body. "We want a drink. You sell it, don't you?"

The man looked the trio over. "I guess you're okay. What do you want to drink?"

"Some whisky. That right, boys? Sure. We'll have some of your good whisky."

The three took seats at a square

table at the back of the room and the owner went behind a medium-sized bar and poured three glasses of liquor, brought them to the table.

Coll held the glass up before him, studied it. "Bad color." He turned to Pete and Frankie. "What do you think, boys?"

"Bad color," Frankie agreed.

"Yeah, very bad," Pete said.

Coll put the glass to his mouth and took a drink, spat it out. "This is poison!" he shouted. "Don't drink it, boys!"

Coll stood up. "What's your name, you bastard?"

"Meyers. Max Meyers."

Coll laughed harshly. "Max Meyers, eh? A fat Dutchman who sells poison whisky." Coll threw the remains of the glass into Meyers' face, slapped and backhanded him several times. "You know who we really are, Max? We're from the Liquor Drinkers Association of the Bronx. The reports say you sell bad liquor."

The thoroughly cowed man retreated several steps. "Whatta you guys want? That's good whisky. As good as anybody's."

"You hear that, boys?" Coll said to Pete and Frankie. "He says it's as good as anybody's. He says it's as good as Schultz' liquor."

He turned back to Meyers. "Is that what you said, Max?"

"You want money? I'll give you money. Here." He dug into his pocket and took out some bills.

"Here's fifty dollars. Just leave me alone."

Coll snatched the money from Meyers' hand. "Fifty dollars," he sneered. "A payoff to let him sell his rotgut whisky. You know who I am?"

The man shook his head, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth where several flecks of blood had gathered.

"My name's Vincent Coll, Max. Get it? Vincent Coll. You know what we're gonna do? No? Well, we're gonna pour all your lousy rotgut whisky down the toilet, and tomorrow you will get a load of good Schultz whisky. And good Schultz beer. And you better have the cash on hand to pay for it."

"I can't," Meyers stammered. "The guy I buy it from will kill me. He said—"

Coll hit him with a vicious punch to the midsection which doubled him up then smashed both his fists into his face. Blood gushed from Meyers' nose and mouth, and he groaned aloud.

"My nose. It's broken." He coughed then and spat out a mouthful of blood. "Don't hit me any more. Don't hit me."

"Sure. I won't hit you. The next time I'll kill you. You tell that guy you buy your rotgut whisky from that Vincent Coll changed your brand, and if he wants to do anything about it he can find me tonight on the corner of Westchester and Southern Boulevard."

"You'll have to protect me," Meyers whined. "When he comes here you'll have to protect me."

Coll uttered a hollow laugh. "You won't need any protection, Max. Just say Vincent Coll. That's all the protection you need."

The next three operators of speakeasies fared no better than Max Meyers. Coll beat them unmercifully, spilled out all their booze and beer, and in one place he wrecked every piece of equipment because the owner, one Abe Feldstern, fought back. Feldstern wound up in the hospital with a skull fracture, several broken ribs, a damaged kidney, and an assortment of cuts, bruises, and abrasions.

When Coll, Pete, and Giordano returned to Schultz' headquarters the Dutchman was waiting for them. Standing beside Schultz was Fats McCarthy. Schultz regarded the trio quizzically. McCarthy's face was expressionless.

"You can deliver your beer and liquor to these three places," Coll said, and put the slip of paper he held in his hand on the desk before Schultz.

"What happened in the fourth place?" Schultz asked coldly.

"The guy got a little stubborn and I had to use a little more persuasion. His wife came out while I was persuading him, started to scream and I had to kinda quiet her a little."

"So we heard," Schultz an-

swered. "You knocked out three of her teeth. Feldstern is in serious condition. You know that?"

Coll shrugged. "I hate stubborn guys. This one was a real donkey." He shrugged again. "Besides, he tried to hit me back. I had to defend myself."

"I like a little more finesse," Schultz said. "Persuasion? It's okay when you got no other way left. I got a call from a pal of mine in the precinct. He said the captain is upset over the beating. I smoothed it over. With a head of lettuce leaves. Y'unnerstand, Coll? A head of lettuce leaves. That's a grand in my language. Pretty expensive, huh?"

"What did you want me to do, hit the guy with a sack of marshmallows?"

"Coll," McCarthy said then, "you've proved you can handle the work. What you haven't proved is the right way to handle it. We can't stand beefs from the cops. So long as we keep the rough work out of our business they won't bother us. Feldstern was also paying off, so he made a beef. We're going to pay his hospital expenses. Also for his wife's teeth. Anything else we need to tell you?"

Coll grunted. "No. Not a thing. I get your point."

"Okay," Schultz said. "You boys are through for the day. By the way, where can we reach you when we want you, in a hurry like?"

"I have a phone."

The efforts of Schultz and McCarthy to soft-pedal Coll's harsh violence was a failure. Hiring Coll was a calculated error. Pete and Giordano were easy to handle. Too easy, as a matter of fact, and Schultz dropped both from his payroll after a month, which burned Coll.

Schultz had upped his pay to \$250 weekly, but that was peanuts to Coll's way of thinking. What he thought about was Schultz's income of hundreds of thousands of dollars yearly. More than that. A million even.

A week later, Coll propositioned Carmine Barelli, another Schultz hood, to go along with him, Pete, and Giordano on a heist of the Sheffield Farms Dairy in the Bronx.

"Dutch wouldn't like that," Barelli said.

"To hell with Schultz!" He poked a finger into Barelli's chest. "I'm giving you a chance to pick up some real money. I want you to come along."

The vehemence in Coll's tone shook Barelli. He knew of Coll's temper and his kill-crazy lust. He had to choose between Schultz's displeasure and Coll's anger. He made what to him was a logical choice.

The robbery netted almost twenty thousand dollars. Coll handed Barelli twenty-five hundred.

"This ain't an even split, Vince,"

Barelli complained. "I did my part. I was right there with you. I'm entitled to an even split."

Coll nodded his head, his eyes narrowing. "Okay, Carmine. An even split." He handed Barelli another twenty-five hundred. "You got your even split. But you and me is split too, see."

"Geez, Vince, don't get sore about it. I'm only asking you to be fair."

"This was my job. I planned it. All the way. Fair? Damned right I was fair. Pete and Frankie got the same thing you got, and they ain't beefing. Okay. You got five G's. Blow."

CARMINE BARELLI worried about Coll for several days, tried to patch up things between them when they were together in Schultz's headquarters but Coll refused to look at him.

A week later, May Smith, Barelli's girl friend and a taxi dancer with a figure like a Rockette and an impish face, called Carmine Barelli.

"Honey, Vincent Coll wants you to meet him at Inwood Street and 170th. He says he wants to straighten things out between you. My God, honey, you ain't got Vincent Coll mad at you, have you?"

"He was. Maybe he ain't now. I hope so. Listen, you go with me. He won't do anything if you're along. Just in case."

"Honey, I'm scared. Maybe you



shouldn't go. Maybe you should tell Mr. Schultz about it."

"No, that would be worse. You come along. He won't do anything if you're there. I know that."

"Do I have to, honey? Oh, my God, I'm scared. Scared!"

"Don't be. Nothing will happen. Just come along."

Barelli and May met Coll at the rendezvous. Coll was sitting in a car. The street was deserted, as Coll was certain it would be.

"Hello, Carmine," Coll said coldly. "I want to straighten you out. Like this." Coll leveled a pistol at Carmine.

"No, don't, Vince! Don't kill me. We're friends!"

"Friends, hell!" Coll shot Barelli three times in the belly while May screamed hysterically. She started to run, slipped and fell, and Coll stood over her, gave a short, maniacal laugh, and shot her dead.

The underworld grapevine said Coll was the killer. So did the cops. But there were no witnesses. Schultz didn't need any to convict Coll.

"You killed Barrelli and his girl friend, Coll!" Schultz shouted at him. "You did it. I know you did it. And I know why. It was over that Sheffield robbery. That was two mistakes. I told you no outside work. That was number one. Knocking off Barelli, a man in my organization, was number two."

"You're wrong, Dutch. I had nothing to do with either caper. So don't pin them on me."

"Coll! Who the hell do you think you're talking to? I know every damned thing that goes on around this town. And I sure as hell know what's going on in my own organization."

"Yeah? Well, here's one thing you don't know. From now on, I want half of everything I've brought in, and half of everything I'm going to bring in. How's that, Dutch?"

Dutch stared unbelievingly at Coll. He wasn't sure he had heard Coll correctly.

"What did you say?" he asked, his words coming out slow and cold.

Coll repeated his demands.

Schultz laughed, a high, mirthless laugh. "You crazy bastard! I don't have partners. And I sure as hell wouldn't want one like you! Get out. You're fired!"

"You owe me some money," Coll said flatly.

Schultz reached into his pocket and counted out some bills, threw them on his desk. "There it is. Five hundred. One week's pay."

"Hand it to me," Coll demanded.

Schultz let out another short, mirthless laugh. "Pick it up if you want it!"

Coll brushed the bills onto the floor.

"*You pick it up!*" he retorted, contempt in his voice, and stalked out.

Coll wasted no time gathering a group of young thugs around him and set out to wreck Schultz's empire. He held up the Dutchman's trucks, beat the drivers unmercifully, maiming some with the butt end of a pistol or a pair of brass knucks, after which he drove away the truck and its cargo of booze and beer.

On several occasions a driver or the protecting rider attempted to fight back. Coll shot them dead. His peculiar rationalization was that the killings were justified because the men resisted, but in truth it was just an excuse.

He had set out in earnest to decimate the Dutchman's mob, to put fear into everyone in the organization and thus perhaps draw some of the men into his own gang. His every depredation, every senseless murder, was the act of a man compelled to go on, ceaselessly and relentlessly.

But each act of violence, instead of advancing him to where he wanted to be took him a step nearer to his own destruction, although he didn't believe it. Such was his blind egotism. He had allowed to slip from his mind certain facets of the Dutchman's character, the hot temper, the brutal efficiency with which Schultz killed, as in the cases of Joey Amberg, Louis Amberg, and Frank Teitelbaum, who had been cut up with an axe and stuffed in trunks which were tossed over the Brooklyn Bridge and into the waters below.

Heisting the Dutchman's truck-loads of beer and booze gave Coll an idea. Why not open up his own saloon and use the stuff he stole from Schultz to stock it? A few weeks later he opened up the MAD DOT, near Dyckman Street. Schultz heard about it and fumed.

"There's only one way to stop that punk," Schultz raved, "kill him! And everybody with him!"

Several of Coll's mob were murdered thereafter, and Coll repaid the killings in kind. The Dutchman's triggermen thought they finally had caught up with Coll one evening when they shot and killed a young hood named Roy Sloane, who bore a striking physical resemblance to Coll.

Schultz laughed gleefully when he was given the news until he learned the truth and then he swore. His triggermen followed up this killing with another, which

tore up Coll and set him off on a wild rampage of destruction and murder.

The Dutchman's triggermen caught Peter Coll sitting in a car in front of the MAD DOT and riddled him with machine gun slugs.

Coll wept at his brother's funeral and vowed the most terrible reprisal against Schultz.

"I'll cut him in two!" he swore. "I'll tear out his heart and feed it to the pigs!"

The killings increased on both sides, a dozen of the Dutchman's gang died and half as many of Coll's. But neither Schultz nor Coll could corner the other, and this was their prime objective.

The attention Coll gave to knocking off Schultz hoodlums took much of his time from the important matter of making money, which he needed to meet the heavy payroll his gang of hoods demanded. He decided on kidnaping rival gangsters and holding them for ransom. New York City's underworld was really shaken up then.

One of the men Coll snatched was Frenchy DeMange, Owney Madden's lieutenant. Coll sent word to Madden that he wanted fifty thousand dollars for Big Frenchy's safe return to the fold. Madden sent word back that he wanted to talk to Coll.

Arrogantly, alone but armed, disguised with a fake mustache and steel-rimmed glasses, Coll

called on Madden in his headquarters.

"You have the money for me?" Coll asked.

Madden shook his head. "You've made a bad move, Vincent. I don't believe you can get away with this one."

Coll sneered. "You want that guy back, Owney, then cough up with the dough. You don't, and I'll send you his heart."

Madden tried to reason with Coll. "Vincent, you and I haven't had any trouble. I haven't taken sides in your difficulty with Dutch, and I won't. I don't think I have this coming to me. You turn Frenchy loose and I'll forget the whole thing."

Coll scowled. He had taken to scowling at everything because he believed that when he scowled he was the Vincent Coll that was feared. If he also were hated, which he believed, it was because he was feared. That made sense, he told himself. People hate those they fear.

And right now Madden feared him, or feared what he might do, which was the same thing.

"Owney, I thought you knew me better than that. I snatched Frenchy for a payoff of fifty grand. I'm going to give you a bargain rate, as a favor, a special favor. Thirty-five grand. Now. Kick it in now or you'll have Frenchy's heart tomorrow morning, cold as a cake of ice at the South Pole."

Madden stared at him for a long time, then opened a drawer in his desk, took out an envelope, counted out the money and handed it to him. "Thirty-five grand, Vincent. Bargain rate."

Coll took the money and pocketed it then grinned at Madden. When he grinned he looked like the devil himself, a devil who threw a quick lever and plunged you into his private hell to sweat, twist, cough up young lungs, and toil harshly to an unendurable death.

WITH ALMOST two hundred thousand dollars in kidnap money on hand, Coll now could give his full attention to Schultz and he did so by wrecking almost every place where the Dutchman had stored his trucks, beer and bootleg booze. He trailed Schultz's hoods, shot at them, wounded some, killed others, and sent word that he wouldn't rest until he had killed Schultz.

The Dutchman was scared for the first time in his life.

"That crazy son ain't human!" he cried.

Schultz's statement was a little ironic, considering the fact that he was a little less than human himself.

"We'll get him," Fats McCarthy declared. "Sooner or later, we'll get him. The boys are looking for him every day. He's going to make a bad move and then we'll get him."

Schultz took to hiding out in the

apartment brothels operated by Polly Adler, the most famous madam in New York's history. In one of them, on West 83rd Street, he set up an arsenal, just in case Coll learned of his whereabouts.

Fats McCarthy and Lulu Rosenkrantz took turns as bodyguards but even with one or the other standing by Schultz still was nervous. Polly noticed this, especially on one occasion when a girl slammed the refrigerator door too hard and Schultz leaped off the couch.

"What the hell was that!" he shouted, and yanked the gun from his shoulder holster.

"Nothing, nothing at all, Dutch," Polly answered. "Just the refrigerator door. One of the girls pushed it shut instead of—"

"Well, goddammit," Schultz broke in, "tell her to close it quiet-like! What the hell is she doing here anyway? You ain't doing no business here!"

"She's got no place to stay. I owe her that much."

"Tell her to get a place. Here's some money. No." He put the roll of bills back into his pocket. "No good. She might talk. Bring her in here."

"What are you going to do, Dutch?" Polly was frightened for the girl. "She's a good kid. She wouldn't do you any harm."

"I'm not gonna hurt her. Bring her in here."

Polly brought the girl, a tall



brunette with good legs and a buxom figure. Schultz looked her over. She didn't look like a prostitute, and she couldn't have been more than twenty.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Dorothy Kushmer." She was obviously nervous as she stammered out her name.

"How long you been working for Polly?"

The girl looked toward Polly, who said, "Go ahead and tell him."

"I haven't worked yet. I was going to until—until you came here."

"You know who I am?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Dutch Schultz."

"You can drop the 'sir' and the 'Mr.' Just call me Dutch and we'll get along just fine. Is this your first time?"

"Yes, it is. I came to New York from Detroit about three months ago. I'm a dancer. I couldn't get a job and I ran out of money. I met a girl in a booking agent's office and she told me about Miss Adler."

Dutch shook his head, looked at Polly with reproachful eyes. "For God's sake, Polly! Listen, kid, why don't you go back home? I'll stake you to your fare."

"I can't. There's nothing back there for me. I have to make it here."

"Here? In this house?" A thought suddenly struck Schultz. This kid could be used. She was unknown, fresh looking. "Look, I don't think you're cut out for this racket. I own the Embassy Club. I'll give you a job there. A hundred a week."

The girl relaxed and smiled. "Thank you, Dutch. Thank you very much. I'll work hard. I'll do anything you say."

"Good, good. There's something I want you to do for me. You look like a pretty bright girl. There's a guy I want to find, only he mustn't know it, and you mustn't let him know, not by any word or look or anything, see?"

"Dutch, for God's sake, don't!" Polly interjected.

"She won't get hurt," Dutch argued. "No one knows her. I've got to get that guy. It's either him or me. And time is running out too damned fast."

"I'm not afraid," Dorothy said. "I'll do what you say."

"There's a saloon called the MAD DOT. It's in the Bronx." He described the place and how to get there, and gave her a detailed description of Vincent Coll. "You go in there, sit at a table and order a drink. Don't let any of the guys in the place pick you up or sit at your table. You know how to give a guy the brush?"

"She ought to," Polly put in. "That's why she was broke and hungry when she came here."

Dutch grimaced. "Polly, let her talk!"

"I've been giving guys the brush since I was in high school," Dorothy said.

"Good. Now when this guy Coll comes into the saloon, you wait a little while, five minutes or so, then get up and leave. Take a cab for about a mile, to where you'll see a drug store, and call here. When you call, say, 'I'll be home right away.' That will be the information that Coll is in his saloon. Okay?"

"Sure."

"Good." He took out some money from his pocket and handed it to her. "Here's fifty. I don't want you to have too much on you. Might create suspicion, in case. Okay?"

"Sure."

"If this comes off right I'll give you a grand, a thousand dollars, and a job for life in my club."

When Dorothy left, Polly said,

"Dutch, if anything happens to that kid I'll never forgive you."

"Nothing's gonna happen. She's pretty sharp."

About two hours later, Schultz got the call from Dorothy. Her voice was tense. "Hello," she said when he picked up the phone, "I'll be home right away."

"Good! Hurry. Get off the street!" When he hung up he dialed a number in the neighborhood of the MAD DOT. Fats McCarthy answered. "He's there. Get the boys over. Quick!"

Ten minutes later a black sedan pulled up before the MAD DOT and two men got out, while the third stayed at the wheel with the motor running and the front and rear doors of the car open. They moved fast but not fast enough, because a post sentinel at the window saw them and yelled to Coll.

The killers entered just as Coll dashed into the back room and out the rear door. He leaped into his car, drove around the block, saw the parked car with the doors open, slowed down, leaned to his right and emptied his gun at the driver, who ducked at the first shot.

Coll sped away as the two machine gunners came running out of the saloon. The driver had been hit in the left shoulder, but still was able to maneuver the car and a wild chase followed until Coll lost his pursuers.

"That lousy bitch in the saloon!" he said aloud. "She fingered

me! I'll find her!" He pounded the steering wheel. "I'll kill her, kill her, kill, kill!"

ENRAGED TO THE degree of mental blindness to everything but the thought of killing Schultz and the girl who had almost been responsible for his own death, Coll again went on the rampage, wrecking anything and everything he could find that belong to the Dutchman, shooting three more of his men for good measure.

Coll spotted a Schultz truck several weeks later and pulled the driver over.

"Don't kill me, Mr. Coll," the driver pleaded. "I'm new on the job. I got a wife and four kids. This is just a job to me. I do nothing but drive this rig."

Coll sneered. "You ought to know better than work for that lousy creep. I'm gonna give you a break. You get word back to that son that I've got ten men out looking for him and that broad that fingered me. I'm gonna find him if I have to go to hell to do it. You got that?"

"Yes, sir. I'll get word to him somehow. If I see him or Mr. McCarthy or Mr. Rosencrantz I'll sure as hell tell them just what you said."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"Thanks, Mr. Coll. Thanks very much. Maybe I can do you a favor someday."

"Yeah, maybe you can. If you

can, call the MAD DOT saloon.
What's your name?"

"Harry—"

"Harry. That's good enough."

On Tuesday afternoon, July 28, 1931, one of the hottest days New York had seen in many years, with the temperature hovering at the 95-degree mark, a call came into the MAD DOT saloon for Coll.

"Mr. Coll?"

"Yeah. Who is this?"

"Harry. Remember me? You gave me a break."

"Yeah, Harry. What's up?"

"Mr. McCarthy was in a while ago. I heard him talking to a man here in the garage that he was going to pick up Mr. Schultz because they had to go to Harlem on some business."

"Did he say where in Harlem?"

"No, sir. Just Harlem."

"Okay, Harry. Thanks. You drop into the MAD DOT any time you get a chance. There'll be an envelope for you."

"Thanks, Mr. Coll. You won't tell anyone I told you, will you, Mr. Coll?"

"Don't worry. I've already forgotten it." He hung up and motioned to two men. "Come on. I think we've got the Dutchman. He's going to Harlem."

All afternoon Coll and his two triggermen cruised through the streets of Harlem looking for Schultz and McCarthy. The heat of the day had given way to slight relief as dusk began to settle over

the neighborhood around 107th Street in Harlem's Little Italy, where Joey Rao, a Schultz henchman, watched over things like bookie joints, policy, numbers, dope and pot.

The street was crowded with women, men returning from work, kids in bathing suits and underwear who had played under spouting fire hydrants. It was a teeming, boiling, ghetto scene, the kind that can be found in most metropolitan cities on steaming days—Detroit, Chicago, Jersey City, St. Louis.

In front of the Helmar Social Club, a Schultz operation, lolled Joey Rao, master of all he surveyed under the blessing and protection of his master. In plain words, Joey Rao was no more than a flunky, a paid hireling, but he liked to play big shot, and so he was always surrounded by a host of howling kids who held out their grimy hands for pennies and nickels.

He passed out about three or four dollars a day, and this made him a hero to the kids and a gentleman *paisano* to the elders.

Rao was handing out nickels when he spied the black touring car approaching slowly toward him, the muzzles of two machine guns poked through the lowered windows. He had a flash of Coll's face and that was all he needed. With a yell he dropped to the sidewalk just as the burning rataplan



JACK McGURN

of machine gun fire burst through the noise of the street.

The ugly staccato sounds of the two machine guns were drowned out by the wild screams of women and children and the shouts of men who ran, scrambled, stumbled frantically in efforts to escape the deadly fire. Slugs shattered windows and tore into the brick fronts of stores.

Several bullets wrecked a wooden lemonade stand a few feet from where Joey Rao lay face down, and young Frankie Scalesi, operator of the stand, screamed indignantly though he was frightened out of his wits. Five-year-old Mike

Vengalli was struck in the base of the spine and lay bleeding and unconscious on the sidewalk. His brother Salvatore also was hit. Three-year-old Michael Bevilacqua was struck by slugs as he lay sleeping in his carriage. Other bullets ripped into fourteen-year-old Florence D'Amello, and into five-year-old Samuel Divino.

The black car roared away, leaving havoc, pandemonium, loud lamentations of hysterical mothers, weeping fathers, sympathetic friends and neighbors. And with it, death.

The reaction to this abysmally horrible act was instantaneous. The cops knew it to be Coll's handiwork, and an immediate search for him was begun by a thousand police officers and detectives.

Newspapers screamed for the scalps of the killers and referred to the incident as "The Baby Massacre" in stories and editorials. Protests were made by civic and religious groups, by the American Legion, by congressmen, by Mayor Jimmy Walker and Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

"It's time to call a halt to these outrageous activities by gangsters and hoodlums!" Walker said in a press conference. "I've ordered the police department to use every available man to track down the perpetrators of this heinous crime."

Governor Roosevelt was far more outraged. "There are no

words to express my feelings. This is one of the most damnable crimes in the history of our state. I have commanded every police agency in New York to search out and bring to trial the men responsible for this act, no matter whom it touches."

Huge rewards were offered by the metropolitan papers, as well as by citizens' groups, for the apprehension and conviction of the killers.

The heat was too much for Vincent Coll and he went into hiding.

And Coll stayed in hiding for a month and then the four walls of his room began to close in on him and he said, "To hell with them. They're not going to keep me locked up like this!"

He dyed his hair, grew a mustache, put on a pair of glasses, and went out into the street. No one recognized him because he was careful to stay away from any place where hoodlums hung out.

He then met Lottie Kreisberger. She was a tall, svelte brunette with two marriages behind her, both times to hoods, each of whom left her a widow when gangland rivals perforated them with heavy caliber machine gun slugs.

Coll didn't know this when he met her or he might have steered clear of her as a Jonah. All he knew at the moment was that he needed a woman, and this one carried herself like she knew what she was made for, a woman aware of her

body and eager to prove its availability.

She didn't disappoint him. He stayed with her for three days. He had food brought to the room, dozens of sandwiches, bottles of milk and soda, fruit, cake and cookies so they wouldn't have to go out. She didn't object.

Satiated, his old self again, Coll planned his resumption of attacks against Schultz. He rounded up half a dozen of his gang and raided the Dutchman's garage on College Avenue, where he smashed every slot machine, beer rack, truck, and every other piece of equipment except about twenty cases of booze which he took.

He then shot and killed Joe Mullins, an inoffensive worker, for good measure while the man pleaded and whimpered for his life.

IN OCTOBER, the cops finally picked up Coll and Lottie in a West Side hotel. They had changed hotels every week; just in case someone in the Dutchman's mob might have spotted them.

Coll was placed in showups and partially identified by several witnesses to the shootings in 107th Street. Coll wasn't sure they could *make* him positively but he wasn't taking any chances. He engaged Samuel Leibowitz, one of the most successful and brilliant trial lawyers in America, winner of more than a hundred murder cases.

Trying a suit in which not only the city and state were anxious to gain a conviction but the entire country was right up Leibowitz's alley. A man of profound integrity, he nevertheless held to the philosophy that a defendant was entitled to the very best defense he could get.

He was a master in the demonstration technique of presenting facts to a jury, letting them "see" as well as hear the evidence. Woe also to a state's witness who shadowed the truth.

Leibowitz was aware that Vincent Coll was not an innocent victim of the law, charged with a crime he did not commit. He knew all about him, and no doubt despised him, but his duty was to his client, and having taken the case he set about to win it.

The one important, salient point, as Leibowitz saw it, was to establish reasonable doubt. The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution provides that no person can be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, and due process meant a fair and impartial trial. Too, the American system of jurisprudence declares that a defendant is presumed innocent until proved guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, the salient point.

The main witness against Coll was not one of the mothers, fathers, or relatives of the children slain or wounded, nor any of the children who were in the street

when the shootings occurred, but a character who said he was from Missouri and gave his name as George Brecht. He testified that he had been at the scene of the crime and positively identified Vincent Coll as one of the men in the car.

Leibowitz spotted him for what he was, and when Brecht was turned over to him for cross-examination he treated him gently, at first. He asked several perfunctory questions, idly, in a manner which threw the witness completely off his guard. Then, as idly, he began his attack.

"What did you say you did for a living, Mr. Brecht?"

"I sell Eskimo Pies."

"How long have you been selling Eskimo Pies, Mr. Brecht?"

"About four or five months."

"You are familiar with the product?"

"Certainly."

"Will you please describe the wrapper, the trade-mark, and that of any other printing on it?"

Eskimo Pies featured a wrapper with a rising sun, as famous then as the Heinz 57 trade-mark, Wrigley's gum, or Campbell's soups. The witness hemmed and hawed and finally admitted he didn't know.

"You don't really sell Eskimo pies, do you?"

"No, sir."

"You lied about that?"

"Well, I had to say something."

"You were as truthful about

that as you were about everything else you testified to on direct examination?"

"No, sir. I saw him. I was there."

Judge Corrigan and the district attorney were furious and showed it as they saw the case slowly disintegrating. The jury, too, stared angrily at the witness. Leibowitz continued to tear him apart.

"You did time, didn't you, Mr. Brecht?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Just answer the question, Mr. Brecht. I'll ask you what I want the jury to hear." Leibowitz then stared at him as if he were a scientist examining a strange bug under a microscope. "You are a convicted thief, Mr. Brecht?"

"Yes, sir," Brecht answered sullenly.

"And for the crime of perjury?"

"Yes, sir."

"As a matter of fact, you could call yourself a professional witness, couldn't you?"

"No, sir, I'm not!" This response was in anger.

"Well, now, you did testify in a case wherein you were later charged with perjury and convicted. Isn't that true?"

Brecht reluctantly admitted it.

"No more questions, Mr. Brecht. You may step down."

Leibowitz then made a motion for a directed verdict of not guilty and Judge Corrigan had no alternative but to grant it. The newspapers howled; Schultz, Madden,

and Terranova swore, but decided that while the court acquitted Coll they did not. He had to go.

Coll walked out of the courtroom a free man, more arrogant than ever, talking big, vowing again to run Schultz out of town or kill him, and along with him, Owney Madden and Ciro Terranova, and then he would take over the whole city.

Coll was then only twenty-four years old, in every way the mad dog the newspapers called him. It was then that Dutch Schultz, failing to kill him, called Al Capone and asked for help.

Schultz was still hiding out in Polly Adler's apartment, and with him was Dorothy Kushmer, who was far more fearful of wandering out into the street than Schultz.

On February 8, 1932, Walter Winchell, famed columnist for the *New York Daily Mirror*, ran an item in his column:

Planes brought in expert trigermen to battle the town's Capone. Local banditti have made one hotel a virtual arsenal, and several hot spots are ditto because Master Coll is giving them a headache.

Coll read the item and laughed over it. "Chicago! Them guys? Punks! Who the hell they kidding!"

A thousand men died in Chicago's streets during the Twenties, most of them rivals of Capone, and the man who murdered a large percentage of them was Machine

Gun Jack McGurn, the same McGurn who wielded one of the Tommy guns in the infamous St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

He was no punk. He was, in reality, the most deadly of all the triggermen and executioners in the underworld, a master with a sub-machine gun, coldly efficient. Had Coll bothered to recall what he knew about him, and to conjecture that perhaps one of the men being flown in from Chicago was McGurn, he would have fled the city to a remote corner of the globe. But he was too arrogant.

Several days later, Lottie left the Cornish Arms Hotel on West 23rd Street between 8th and 9th Avenues, where Coll had rented a room, and walked toward the corner where she intended to shop. She was stopped by two men, sharply dressed, smooth, soft-spoken, and she recognized them immediately for what they were. Hoods.

"What do you want?" she asked in a frightened tone.

"Get in the car, Lottie. We want to talk to you. Don't give us any trouble and you won't get hurt."

One of the men held open the rear door of the sedan and she got into the car, the man who had spoken to her got in beside her, the driver got behind the wheel and drove around the block where he parked.

"Lottie," the man beside her said, "you're a pretty smart girl,



we're told, so you're going to get a break. If you go along. If you don't, you're going to be dead. Understand?"

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, and decided to do anything they asked.

"Your man is all through. It's going to be today, tonight, tomorrow, or a week from now, but he's going to get it. We don't want to waste any time. As I said, we've been told you're a pretty smart girl. You can prove it to us now."

"I'll do it," she stammered out. "What do you want me to do?"

Sometimes fear will destroy all will in a man, and more so in a woman, and often only for the moment when the threat of death is a specter sitting alongside. But Lottie knew that to agree and not to carry out their will would develop that threat into a reality. These men didn't talk idly.

"You figure out some way to get Coll into the street tonight, or into that drug store on the corner where your hotel is located. If you can get him down here alone, so much the better. Then you won't be in danger of getting hit. Think you can do it?"

"Yes, I think so. Do you have to do this to him? Couldn't I persuade him to leave town. Leave and never come back."

"No, Lottie. This is the way it has to be. Okay?"

She started to cry, then composed herself. "All right, I'll do it. But what will I do afterward?"

"You'll be all right, Lottie. You're a pretty girl, and a wise one. You'll get along." He dug into his coat pocket and removed an envelope. "There's two thousand dollars there. That will help you over the rough spots until you can organize yourself again."

How she accomplished it no one will ever know, but she did. Coll came down from the Cornish Arms Hotel that night and walked to the drug store. The four men in the sedan across the street saw him, waited to see if he would enter the drug store. He did.

"Okay," McGurn said, "this is it. Let's go."

Two of the other men in the car got out with him. Each carried a Thompson submachine gun. One man stood outside the door. McGurn and the other man strode into the store. There were several

people at the lunch counter, a few more waiting for prescriptions to be filled.

Coll had gone to the rear of the store into the lone telephone booth. He did not see the gunmen.

"Okay," the gunman who had stationed himself at the door said. "Everybody just stay where you are and don't move and nobody will get hurt. Keep quiet. Don't say a word. That's it. Just like that."

The customers and clerks were frozen into immobility at the sight of the ugly weapons. McGurn strode calmly toward the phone booth. Coll's back was to him, his head bent into the mouthpiece, obviously talking to someone. There was a slightly audible click as McGurn slipped off the safety and pumped a round into the firing chamber.

The first blast shattered the glass of the booth and threw Coll against the far wall of the booth. McGurn fired again and again, and Coll, his face and head destroyed, his blood splattering the phone booth as high as the ceiling, slumped forward and down. He was unmistakably dead.

McGurn turned, glanced briefly at the people in the store, and strode calmly, like some avenging ghost, into the street. There was the roar of a motor accelerated at high speed, and it was over and done. That's the way it usually happens.

Even to one like Mad Dog Coll.

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Turnaround

I had found her at last, the slim girl who had left me for another —an elusive lover named Death...

by M. G. OGAN

I WAS recalled from an assignment in Kuwait, where I'd been working with a British intelligence team. At our embassy in Rome I had orders to report back to United States. A day and a night later I



landed at Kennedy International in New York. My C.I.A. boss, Robert, was up from Washington to meet me at the airport.

Robert broke me in as a secret agent nine years ago, but I've never known his last name. He's a short, stocky man with gray eyes, a face hard to remember, and a steel-trap brain.

Robert knows more about Woodrow Scott than I know about myself.

"You can be yourself on this one, Woody," he told me in the waiting room. "Your plane leaves for San Francisco in half an hour. Gate Nine. Check in at the St. Francis Hotel out there." He handed me half of a three by five file card that had been torn. "You're teamed with the man who has the other half of this card. Good luck."

A quick handshake and Robert had disappeared into the crowd.

I registered at the St. Francis early the next morning and had breakfast sent up to my room. I hadn't been in San Francisco since I'd graduated from the University of San Francisco ten years ago. It was great to be back.

The phone rang and a Steve Thompson was calling from the lobby. -I'd already checked the room for electronic bugs while waiting for room service, so I asked him to come up. His torn half of the card matched mine.

Thompson was a youngster, twenty-four, with a snub-nosed,

open face, curly blond hair, and wide-spaced blue eyes. Dressed in a shabby black suit, he needed a haircut.

"Did you come through the lobby?" I asked.

"No, I called from there. I came up the fire stairs. No one noticed."

"If we're lucky. You should have phoned from a booth and had me meet you, away from the hotel." Thompson flushed, so I let it go at that. "What's your cover?"

"Merchant seaman."

"Know much about ships?"

"I've been a sailor."

"Good. Want to brief me? So far I'm blind."

"There's a Dr. Clyde Schroeder at the U. of C. over in Berkeley. The nuclear physicist, only he's also an expert cryptographer. Dr. Schroeder formulates codes for C.I.A."

Two months ago C.I.A.'s Orange code was broken, and the West German network was shot full of holes. Three men and one woman were dead, as a consequence. Seven others were missing.

"We have a Blue code now," Thompson told me, "but we're afraid to use it."

"They may have it already?"

Thompson nodded. "There's a chance. That's what we have to find out. There's two possibilities. This man Schroeder may be a double agent."

"What's the alternative?"

"His confidential assistant may

have sold out, and that's your job. To find out if she has, I mean. Her name is Ann Devon."

Ann's name, linked with Schroeder's, rang a bell. I'd known her at U.S.F. I'd heard that she went to work for Schroeder after transferring to the University of Cal, at Berkeley.

Thompson gave me Ann's address, an apartment building on Lombard Street, near Van Ness. "She lives there alone and commutes to Berkeley," he said. "You're to check out Ann as well as Schroeder."

"What angle are you working?"

"I'm looking for a man named Fritz, a woman called Freda, and their radio operator."

"Any progress?"

"Some."

"Give me twenty-four hours to get with this, and then meet me at the Coit Tower on Telegraph Hill."

I glanced at my watch. "Nine sharp tomorrow morning. Do you know the spot?"

"You mean the deal shaped like a fire hose nozzle?"

"That's it. Mrs. Coit was a fire buff."

"I'll be there."

"Where are you staying?"

"Flopouses. I move around."

"See you." When Steve Thompson got up to leave, I said, "Be careful."

He grinned.

"I always am."

"You weren't this morning."

ANN DEVON was a Physics major at U.S.F. when we were classmates in English IV, her only elective course.

"We who are about to destroy this world," she said once, "should know its culture."

She wasn't beautiful, but Ann was pretty. Slender without being skinny, with sandy hair, Ann's broad forehead and hazel eyes were her most attractive features.

We dated once—dinner on Fisherman's Wharf, and after that, the San Francisco Opera—and spent a few evenings in her rented room on Judson Terrace. I was working my way, and she was at school on a scholarship, so neither of us had money to spare. We made it on classical records and talk. Both of us were lonely.

Ann had her application in at that time for a job with Dr. Schroeder.

"He's such an intense little man that he frightens me," she said, "but I admire him more than anyone I've ever known."

We didn't go deeply into why Ann admired Dr. Schroeder. I was jealous of him, as a matter of fact. I wanted all of Ann's admiration if I could get it, and I tried.

I didn't quite succeed.

"I can't fall in love with any man enough to give him myself," she told me the last time I saw her. "I only wish that I could. It would be so much simpler."

I recalled how surprised I'd been

a few days later when Ann's landlady, Mrs. Forbes, told me Ann had checked out of her rooming house and had transferred to the Berkeley campus. Mrs. Forbes was a plump, motherly woman. "Did you know that you're the only friend she ever had, Mr. Scott?"

"I don't make friends easily, either." I was more upset than I wanted Mrs. Forbes to know. "Did she leave an address?"

"No, she didn't. I don't understand it. Leaving in such a hurry, I mean. She was in school, and all."

"It had something to do with a job she was after," I said, as if I knew.

"She's to send for her things," Mrs. Forbes said again. "Mr. Forbes has them all in the garage. Do you want me to let you know where she is now?"

I told her not to bother.

I proceeded now to the address Steve Thompson had given me and saw that Ann's apartment building had once been a town house. A four-car garage faced Lombard at street level, with the manager's apartment behind it, facing a narrow court.

The second floor apartment was vacant. Ann's apartment was on the top floor.

Mr. Rizzoto was the building manager. He was bald, Italian, getting fat, and had always been lazy. "You want to see the vacant apartment, I give you the key. It's a good one and the lady upstairs,

she's very quiet. You got your own entrance, like she has, so nobody bother you. Rent's a hundred and fifty, but you like it, maybe one twenty-five. Help yourself, Mr—"

"Thanks." I took the key and smiled. "Is the layout the same as the lady's apartment?"

He nodded. "Just the same."

It was a pleasant apartment, with the large living room over the garage, facing Lombard. There was a full kitchen with a breakfast nook. From the living room, a hallway passed a small bedroom, which could be used as a study, to reach the master bedroom. There was a bathroom with a corner tub between the two bedrooms, with a third door opening into the hallway.

Only Mr. Rizzoto's pickup truck and battered Chev sedan had been in the garage. I listened, however, to make certain nobody was upstairs. Ann's apartment was silent.

"You like it?" Mr. Rizzoto asked hopefully, when I returned the key. "No children, I forgot to tell you. You got kids?"

"I don't think so. I'll let you know about the apartment."

I'd rented a U-Drive business coupe at the airport. I drove on over to Berkeley. I crossed the San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridge, made a quick loop down side streets, crossed back to San Francisco, checked my rear-view mirror, and then went over the bridge again, using another toll booth.

So far as I could tell, I wasn't being followed.

The registrar directed me to Dr. Schroeder's office in the physics building. She also gave me his home address, when I asked. He lived in Sausalito, across the Golden Gate Bridge in Marin County.

I skipped his office and drove back across the Bay bridge, swinging right along The Embarcadero to Cervantes Boulevard, taking Marina and then Doyle Drive to reach the Golden Gate bridge.

Dr. Schroeder's house was a small one on a side street a few blocks back from the bay. I parked across the street and stayed in the car. There was the sound of a vacuum clearer inside.

I rang the doorbell. The vacuum clearer was turned off and a ruddy-faced Irish woman answered the door. "What you want?"

"Is Mrs. Schroeder here? I'm from the—"

"Go to the devil," she told me, not unpleasantly, with hands on her broad hips. "There ain't no 'Mrs. Schroeder', and I've my work to do."

I drove back over the Golden Gate bridge and parked down Lombard from Ann's apartment. By that time, it was the middle of the afternoon. From a phone booth, I dialed Dr. Schroeder's office. A woman answered.

"Ann?"

"Yes. Who is this?"



"An old friend. Woody Scott. Remember me?"

There was a long pause, but she finally said, "Why, of course. Where are you, Woody?" She spoke as if we'd seen each other a month ago.

"I'm here in San Francisco, on leave, at the St. Francis. Can you drop by for a drink this evening, and supper? I'd like to see you again."

"I don't know."

"Please? After eleven years, six months, and ten days, Ann—"

She laughed. "Oh, all right, Woody. Six o'clock at the St. Francis bar?"

"It's a date."

She hesitated. "How will I know you?" She laughed again. "It has been a long time."

"I'll know you," I assured her, and hung up.

The stairway up to her apartment was to the left of the garage—the one to the second floor apartment, to the right. Rizzoto's apartment opened onto the court in back. His pickup truck was gone.

I looked up his number in the phone book and dialed it. After seven rings, I decided he wasn't

home. I'd heard no family noise inside his apartment that morning. The building wasn't being watched, as far as I could determine.

The lock to Ann's apartment yielded to the third key I tried.

An hour later, in Ann's living room, I scratched my head. Her rented room on Judson Terrace had been clean but disorderly. This apartment was completely in order. Even all the wastebaskets had been emptied.

The living room was Chinese modern. There was a console stereo record player. Ann's classical records were in the rack—Offenbach had been her favorite, and her collection was complete—but all of her new records were jazz, except one.

That record was folk music, by *Freda and Her Friends*. It was a Capitol release. Freda's three "friends" wore beards.

Freda had shoulder-length blonde hair, sad eyes, and a pinched face. She'd been sneering at the camera when the shutter snapped.

The record had been taped at *The Living End*, a San Francisco beatnik joint on Beach.

The small bedroom had been set up as a home office, but why? There was a small desk in there, with a desk lamp, plus a desk chair and a second-hand leather couch. The only other furnishing was a bridge lamp, with a 200 Watt bulb. Too bright for reading, and there

was an overhead ceiling light, as well as the desk lamp.

In the desk were a few blank sheets of paper, three unsharpened hard-lead pencils, a soft-lead stub, a ball-point from the liquor store at the corner of Lombard and Van Ness—no address book, no cancelled checks, no receipted bills, and no bills that hadn't been paid, but it was two days after the first of June.

I went back to the room used as an office. I slouched on the couch, hands in my pants pockets, smoking a cigarette.

The waste basket beside the desk finally caught my eye. The other empty waste basket in the bedroom, living room, and kitchen were plastic affairs. This one was a tall one, made from teak.

I got up and lifted it. The waste basket was heavier than it should have been. There was a false bottom!

It took me ten minutes to find the release, but when I did, nested in the bottom was a 35 mm foreign-made camera with a wide angle lens, a dozen rolls of fast but fine-grained film, and the rest of the apparatus necessary for photomicrography.

There was no mystery now about how the enemy got the Orange code. I latched the lid to the false bottom, admired the workmanship again, and put the wastebasket exactly in its place.

From Ann's apartment building

I drove back to the St. Francis. By area code I dialed a Washington, D.C., phone number. "Robert?"

"Talking."

"Scramble this one."

"Just a minute." I waited. "The scrambling machine is on," he said finally. "Shoot."

"What do we have on Ann Devon?"

"Hold it." I heard him talking to someone else. When Robert came on again, he said, "The woman is clean as far as we can tell, and she's been checked back to the day she was born."

Ann was born in Stockton, California. Her father and mother had died in a head-on collision near Bakersfield when she was seven. An aunt, Miss Despard, now deceased, had raised her.

"During her frosh year at U.S.F.," Robert told me. "Let's see —yes, she went home for the funeral. No other living relatives we can find, and we've looked. She went to college on a State of California scholarship, by the way. Ann is a smart girl. I.Q. of one-hundred and forty-three. A point higher than your own, in case you wonder."

"Thanks"

Robert chuckled. "Of course—"

"—these tests aren't completely definitive," I finished for him. "What else do you know?"

"She transferred from U.S.F. to Berkeley during the last half of her senior undergraduate year. The

reason given, she wanted to work for Dr. Schroeder. This is an odd ball thing, Woody."

"What is?"

"You're the only boy friend we can find that Ann has had since she was in high school. We could have missed one, or even two, but I doubt it."

"Who were her friends?"

"We can't find any."

"Thanks, Robert. I've been in touch with Steve."

"He's raw yet, Woody, but a good agent, potentially. Take care of yourself."

ANN DEVON was on time. She paused at the doorway into the bar, gloves and purse in her hand. I waited for her to spot me at the bar.

She was taller than I remembered, but had the same sandy hair—with a gray streak through it now—and she'd put on a few pounds.

She was trimly dressed in a gray tailored suit.

I finally raised a hand to catch her attention; then crossed to meet her.

Ann thrust out both gloved hands to clasp mine. "It's so good to see you!"

If she was putting me on, it was a good act. Her hazel eyes were wiser, now, with wrinkles at the corners. Her smile was different, too.

I found a table. Ann ordered a

Vodka Martini, very dry. I stayed with Scotch and water.

"What have you been doing?" she asked, while we waited for our drinks. "You haven't changed too much, Woody."

She hadn't taken off her gloves. "Just a scar over the right eye, another on the point of my chin, and I've gained ten pounds."

The waiter brought our drinks.

"Woody, I have to rush," she said, sipping her Martini nervously. "You do understand?"

"Of course, Ann."

She smiled brightly.

"You're so brittle that you're liable to break," I told her sourly.

I'd confused her. "It's been a long time, Woody."

The bellhop I'd bribed with a five dollar bill came into the bar, paging me. "Excuse me?"

"Of course." Ann sighed her relief.

When I came back to the table, she was ready to leave. "It's been wonderful seeing you again, Woody. You do understand? I promised—"

"See you around, Ann."

"Call me?" She gave me the number at her apartment. "These are old friends, and they're expecting me for supper. If I'd known—"

I grinned up at her. "Good-by, Ann."

I watched the swing of her hips under the gray skirt as she left the bar.

Half an hour later, I was parked across Lombard from her apartment.

Ann Devon was home, and alone. Fifteen minutes later, she came down and made a phone call from the public booth at the corner of Lombard and Van Ness.

When she was back in her apartment, I went back to the St. Francis, ordered dinner sent up to my room, and stripped to take a shower.

I spent the night parked down the street from Dr. Schroeder's house over in Sausalito. He was home when I got there. He spent the night, until eleven, in the room I'd decided was his study. He stood on the small front porch a few minutes before turning in.

Dr. Schroeder was a short, thin, stoop-shouldered man, with a narrow face. Before the house was dark, there was a light in the kitchen:

Dr. Schroeder snacked on crackers and milk. It was a cinch to slip to the kitchen window. His neighbors' house had been dark for two hours.

I'd been parked close enough to hear the phone in his house ring, but it hadn't, all evening.

He worked a cross-word puzzle in the *San Francisco Chronicle* while he ate. It took him fifteen minutes.

In my car, until the milkman arrived at six the next morning, I worked the same puzzle, by the

dash light. I had it only half finished.

At the Coit Tower, Steve Thompson didn't show at nine o'clock. I sat on a stone bench and watched tattered clouds of white fog scoured by the wind, until the bay was clear and sparkling.

I saw ships going to sea on the morning tide.

Thompson wasn't there at ten o'clock. I walked back down Telegraph Hill, found my U-Drive, and headed for Stockton.

On the way, over in Oakland, I bought a *Chronicle*. There had been a brawl in a bar on The Embarcadero, near Beach Street. An unidentified seaman was in the morgue this morning. A party unknown had crushed his head with a bottle.

The bar was near *The Living End*. The D.O.A.'s description matched Steve Thompson's. The story was back on page five.

I phoned Washington, told Robert to cut in the scrambler, and then said, "You've lost a man out here. I think he blew his cover, contacting me at the St. Francis. I'm headed for Stockton."

"Did he get a chance to report back?"

"No, but he thought he was on to something."

There was a pause. "How are you doing?"

"I'm playing a wild hunch," I told him.

"I'll have another agent out



there the day after tomorrow, Woody."

"No. Don't move anyone else in until you hear from me. I'll explain later."

There was a longer pause, but Robert finally said, "All right, for the time being, but keep in touch."

"When I can."

There was no point re-checking C.I.A.'s "Make" on Ann. As far as it went, I was sure that it was accurate. I went to the Bureau of Vital Statistics.

A Doctor Thomas had been in attendance when Ann was born. There was a mark in the ledger, opposite her birth record.

"What's this mean?" I asked the lady in charge.

"That?" She peered at it near-sightedly. "It means Ann Devon wrote for a copy of her birth certificate."

"When?"

"I'll have to look it up."

"Will you, please?"

"It's a lot of trouble."

I waited.

"Oh, all right! Some people!" It was half an hour before she came back, with a smudge of dust on her forehead. The date she gave me on a slip of paper was a few days after Ann Devon transferred from the University of San Francisco to Berkeley.

She'd had to write for a copy of her birth certificate to get the job with Dr. Schroeder. I had the same problem when I applied with C.I.A.

"Is this Doctor Thomas still in practice?"

"No, that's the old doctor. He died two years ago this spring."

"Is there a young Doctor Thomas?"

"Of course there is."

I thanked her and left. I was in luck. His father's medical records were in a musty file. The old man had kept very complete records in a crabbed, almost decipherable hand. Baby Ann had a small strawberry mark on the back of her neck, and another on the heel of her right foot.

I drove back to the St. Francis.

By that time, I'd shot the day. There were no messages at the desk. I left the U-Drive in the hotel garage and took a cab over to Judson Terrace.

Mrs. Forbes didn't take roomers any more. Mr. Forbes passed away five years ago. She remembered Ann as "that girl who moved away, and sent for her things".

"Where did you send them to her, Mrs. Forbes?"

"I don't remember. Mr. Forbes took care of it."

"Thank you, Mrs. Forbes." I started to leave.

"Oh, I'd nearly forgotten. Her typewriter! Mr. Forbes didn't send it. It's still in the garage. Can you take it to her?"

Her name was on the battered portable case. I blew off the dust and told Mrs. Forbes I'd be glad to see that Ann got it.

A little later when I rang her bell, Ann was more surprised than pleased. "Why didn't you telephone first? What is it, Woody?" She didn't intend to invite me in. "I'm very tired tonight."

"So am I, but I've brought you something that you forgot." I showed her the typewriter. "It's a funny thing to have forgotten, don't you think?"

"You mean that's mine?"

I showed her the name on the case. "Typewriters are a personal item students don't forget, usually."

"You'd better come in."

"I had it in mind." We faced

each other in the living room. "Do you believe in hunches?"

"Woody, you're acting very strange. Are you drunk?"

"No. I'm curious, though. About birthmarks."

She was moving away from me, but not making a fuss about it—moving easily, and casually. She turned to reach for a teakwood cigarette box on top of the stereo console.

I made a quick jump and pinned her elbows together behind her back. A shoe heel caught my right shin. She twisted as I tripped her down.

A .25 caliber automatic was nested in the box now, instead of cigarettes. Pinning both wrists above her head with one hand, I looked at the back of her neck. There was no birthmark.

"It was careless of them," I told her. "Even birthmarks can be duplicated."

She stared up at me, breath hissing between her teeth. "What do you want?"

"Fritz, Freda, and your radio man."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's start with your name. Then I'd like to know what you and your friends did with the real Ann Devon. After that, we'll get down to cases—about Fritz, Freda, and the radio man, I mean."

"You're crazy!"

"To a point, you're right. Ann Devon was a girl I could have

loved. Steve Thompson was a nice kid, too. I'm just crazy enough to get what I need to know out of you, if it takes tonight, and all day tomorrow. Why don't you be a nice girl and *turnaround* for me? Know what I mean?"

She knew—her eyes told me that. I gave her time to figure the odds.

"We'll take care of you," I promised, while she was thinking about it. "You won't be deported. They'd turn around, if they were trapped." Suddenly she ran for the door. I caught her and slapped her hard, across the mouth. "Or don't you think so?"

"All right." Defeat and fright were in her eyes. "I don't have anything to do with Ann being dead. You've got to believe that!"

Her name was Katherine, with a Polish last name I couldn't pronounce. She'd been trained in Warsaw, to be groomed in Moscow for her cover role as Ann Devon.

Fritz was her *Control*, the agent in charge of the apparatus. As a Lithuanian "refugee" he was carrying on a modest import-export business on The Embarcadero.

"We never meet," Katherine explained. "He phones me drops for the microfilm."

Freda was odd-job girl in the ring.

"Fritz uses her to blackmail subjects," Katherine explained. "Men or women, it doesn't matter to Freda. She'd do anything!"

The radio man, Nels, was a surprise. Native born, he had a fishing smack anchored at Fisherman's Wharf, with a powerful short-wave transmitter aboard.

"I think it was Nels who got rid of Ann," she finally told me. "With his boat, that could be easily managed, before I came on scene. But it was before. I've never liked that, Woody."

I'd made coffee. Katherine had to hold her cup with both hands, shuddering. The mark of my hand was livid on her face.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, finally.

"Does Fritz have our Blue code?"

"Not yet. He's been nervous."

"Tell him you have it."

Katherine put down her coffee cup.

"It's true," she said. "I do have it. I filmed it before you came."

"What about Schroeder?"

She smiled. "He's always trusted me. He's in love with me, you see."

"How about you?"

Katherine wasn't smiling now. "Yes, I'm in love with him," she said quietly. "Couldn't you guess?"

"I didn't guess," I said, "but I should have known."

"You should have. You're a professional, too, Woody. We're not this easy to crack, when that's all there is to it."

Katherine was right.

Counter espionage is F.B.I. business inside of this country. Katherine set it up for them to make the kill. The C.I.A. got a nice letter of commendation, phrased in the vaguest terms, and a verbal blast —so Robert told me—that was very specific. They calmed down when he gave them all the facts.

Robert met me at Kennedy again, on my way back to Kuwait. "Katherine will get off with a few years in jail," he told me. "She's quite a woman, don't you think?"

"So was Ann Devon."

Robert scowled. "See what you mean, Woody, or do I?"

"You don't," I told him, and left to catch my plane for Lisbon.

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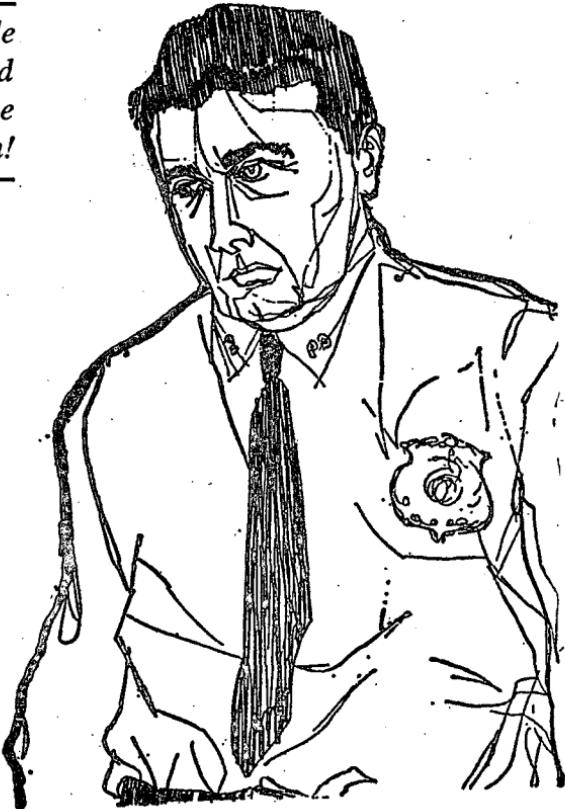
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*I had a simple little
job to do. I only had
to put over a crime
that couldn't happen!*

*Pearls
Before
Wine*
by
JACK
RITCHIE



DIANA SIGHED. "I know it's a desperate measure, Henry," my wife said, "but why don't you consider that job with Uncle Wilfred? He's really quite fond of you and it is an executive position."

I shook my head. "I will not cadge upon your relatives. I much prefer to collect the insurance on your pearls." I lit a cigar. "I shall invite Detective Inspector Murdoch, of course."

"The one who has such trouble with his grammar?"

"But nevertheless a brilliant mind. And that is exactly what we want in this case—a brilliant mind absolutely stymied. We will also invite a half a dozen of our usual dinner guests and Edwin Porson."

Diana frowned thoughtfully. "Edwin Porson? I don't believe I ever heard of him."

"Of course not. I myself have

barely a nodding acquaintance with him at the club. However we really do need his presence. He was one of Mrs. Olliphant's house guests when her safe was looted."

Diana smiled. "Ah, I see what you're up to, Henry. You don't want any of our friends suspected when my pearls disappear."

"Exactly. I prefer the burden of guilt to fall upon a relative stranger."

"Do you suppose anyone will notice that I'm not wearing the genuine pearls?"

"Of course not, my dear. Only an expert can tell the genuine from the imitation and then only after a thorough examination, possibly even X-rays."

I smiled. "To recapitulate. We will be dining and I shall see to it that Jones finds it necessary to go to the cabinet for the red port. When he turns on the small lamp, it will cause a short-circuit and throw the room into total darkness."

Diana nodded. "I will immediately slip off my pearls and hand them to you."

"Right. And as soon as there is sufficient illumination again, you will scream and announce that your pearls are missing."

Thursday evening came and during the beef course, Jones went to the sideboard and pressed the lamp switch. There was a crackle, some sparks, and every light in the room went out.

Diana slipped the pearls into my

hand and I raised my voice. "Jones, I believe there are some candles on the sideboard."

Jones struck a match and proceeded to light the candelabra.

My wife clutched her throat and screamed. "My pearls! They've been stolen!"

Inspector Murdock rose and backed against the closed doors. "Don't nobody leave."

He opened one of the doors just slightly, attracted the attention of an outside servant and directed him to phone the police and see to the fuse box in the basement.

Light was restored shortly and the police arrived.

Murdock quickly ascertained a number of essentials and then spoke. "There are only two ways to get those pearls out of this room. But those French windows are locked and as far as the doorway is concerned, if anybody had opened one of the doors even a little, we would have all noticed it because while it was pitch dark inside here, the light in the next room was still bright."

Murdock's eyes went about the room. "In other words, them pearls—and the thief—are still in this room."

I was one of the first to be led out of the room and thoroughly searched. Of course nothing was found.

When I returned to the dining room, Edwin Porson was escorted out for his turn.

I was about to drop the information to Murdock that Porson had been one of Mrs. Olliphant's house guests, when my wife reached for the sugar bowl and her arm brushed against my water glass.

It tipped over.

My first impulse was to reach for a napkin and my second to swear. Both of them would have been futile.

Instead, we watched as the acid instantly ate through the table cloth and began working on the wood.

Murdock frowned.

My wife managed to laugh lightly. "I just remembered. I wasn't wearing my real pearls tonight. Just the imitations."

It was some fifteen minutes later that Murdock announced that with the help of one of his detectives he had solved everything. "Porson dropped the pearls into the acid and they dissolved."

"Why should he do that?" my wife asked.

"Because he was cornered," Murdock said. "And he had that acid handy for just such an emergency."

"But he denies taking them," Diana said.

Murdock smiled. "It doesn't matter. Like you said, the pearls were imitations and we couldn't put him away for long for something like that anyway. No, it's lucky one of my boys remembered the description of the cuff links."

I was still a bit dazed at the sud-

den turn of events. "So you maintain that Edwin Porson not only stole the Olliphant jewelry, but he had the gall to wear Mr. Olliphant's cuff links to my house?"

I cleared my throat. "And he also had the sneaky presence of mind to push his glass of acid in front of me in an attempt to divert suspicion from himself?"

Murdock nodded.

When he was gone, I turned to Diana. "Why the devil did you have to blurt out that the pearls were just imitations? We could still have collected the insurance."

"I'm sorry," Diana said. "But I thought Murdock really had you when I spilled your acid. I tried to soften the crime, so to speak."

I sighed. "When Murdock's eyes went over all of us a while back, I felt just like—well, like a thief."

"I know, dear," she said. She reached for the sugar again without spilling anything this time. "It's really a very fine executive job, Henry. And Uncle Wilfred wouldn't mind if you took off now and then for a round of golf."

I nodded. "Perhaps everything turned out for the best. I'll see him first thing in—" I stared at her. Had she deliberately over-turned—

Impossible.

But nevertheless I had the feeling that whenever the subject of pearls—or acid—entered our conversation in the future, Diana would look all innocence.

Just as now.

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August—1968

I KILLED HER

*Was she alive, faithless little Marie? Or
was she dead, murdered? Alive or dead,
she'd haunt a certain cop forever . . .*

by C. B. GILFORD

IT WAS Sunday morning, quiet. Lieutenant Mel Connard had spent the latter portion of the night on the cot in his office at precinct headquarters. Saturday evening had been a busy time. Connard was tired, not in his best mood.

That was when the man came in.

Patrolman Schlossman brought him in. A scrawny fellow, medium height, with a dark complexion, dark eyes, long, lank black hair which fell over his forehead so that he had to keep pushing it back. Jules Antal was his name, Schlossman said.

"He says he killed his wife last night."

Mel Connard sized up Jules An-

tal as the man stood there, staring, panting, his narrow shoulders rising and falling with his shallow breaths.

"You got his story, Schlossman?" Connard asked.

"No, sir. I thought you might want to talk to him."

"All right."

Connard waved Schlossman outside, the door closed, and Connard was left alone with the self-accused killer.

"Sit down," he said.

The man obeyed slowly. The weather was warm, but he wore a suit; only slightly rumpled, and a necktie; just a bit awry. The lieutenant noted these details, as well as others; the fact that the man



was perspiring heavily, and that he had a dazed, almost vacant look about him. In a state of shock, mild shock anyway.

"Your name is Jules Antal?" he asked.

A small nod.

"And you killed your wife?"

Another nod, much more emphatic.

Connard waited for details, but none were offered. Jules Antal sat

there, his eyes fastened on his questioner. What was the look? A kind of desperation? A desperate plea to be believed?

"Where's the body?" Connard asked.

Antal moistened his lips, and after a moment he said, "I want you to arrest me."

Connard leaned across his desk. His instincts were telling him strongly now what kind of guy this

Jules Antal was. With an effort he managed to be patient. "Look, Mr. Antal, when we investigate a homicide, we like to start with the body. Where is it?"

"Don't you believe me?" Antal's voice was low, whispered, tense. And desperate.

"I didn't say I didn't believe you. But if you killed your wife, you've got her body somewhere. Where is it? Do you want to show it to us?"

The hesitation was long and painful. Connard didn't shift his gaze from the man's face. He saw contortions there, and finally a decision.

"I threw her body over the Jackson Bridge," Antal said.

SCHLOSSMAN drove the car. Connard sat in the front seat beside him, and Jules Antal, still perspiring even in the breeze, gave directions from the rear. Jackson Bridge, Antal had said, was the place.

He spoke haltingly but he gave details. He'd strangled his wife in their apartment the night before last, Friday, and thus had been in possession of the body for more than twenty-four hours, all day Saturday, undecided about what he should do, whether to turn himself in, or to try to conceal the murder. Then he'd chosen the latter course.

He'd had an old gunnysack in the trunk of his car. It had proved

large enough to contain Marie's folded body. He'd added several bricks to make sure the package would sink. After midnight he'd managed to carry that package out of the apartment building and to put it into the car trunk. No one had seen him.

He'd driven past several locations, docks and wharfs, then back and forth across the Jackson Bridge several times before he felt sure there was no one close enough to see what he was doing. Then he'd simply stopped for a few seconds in the middle of the bridge, probably about three-thirty he reckoned and dumped the sack over the railing. No one apparently had noticed the splash. He'd driven home. Soon afterwards he had begun to regret trying to conceal his crime. Now he was confessing.

Traffic was light on this Sunday morning. Connard told Schlossman to stop in the middle of the four-lane bridge, and hopped out of the car with Antal.

"You dumped the sack here?" he asked the dark little man.

Antal nodded.

"Which side?"

There was a flicker of hesitation in Antal's eyes before he pointed to the downstream side.

"It must have been this side," he answered. "Because I was driving north."

Connard glanced around in all directions. It would indeed have

been easy to dispose of a body in a sack in the way the man had mentioned. Although the bridge carried heavy traffic during weekday business hours, it would be entirely conceivable for it to have been deserted at three-thirty on a Sunday morning. And since the span was a couple of hundred yards in length, a car stopped in the middle need not have been noticed by anyone along either river bank.

Connard leaned over the iron railing and gazed down. Right in the middle of the bridge, right in the middle of the river below.

A good spot. The water was deep down there, a navigable channel for barges and tugs anyway. And the current was fairly swift. What would happen to a corpse in a sack weighted by bricks? If there had been a corpse, that is. It could end up almost anywhere, carried along by the current, until it caught on something, or got buried deeply in the mud. It would be eaten by fish maybe. No, not very likely, not in that dirty river.

"Lieutenant," Jules Antal asked at his shoulder, "are you going to drag the river?"

Connard glanced around. Antal appeared almost pathetically expectant.

"Drag the river?" Connard repeated.

"Yes. You said you wanted to see the body."

Was the man mocking him? He



had put the body—if there had been one—in a place difficult to search. Now was he challenging him to find it? Was he daring him to try? Was he reminding him that a negative result from a dragging operation would not be conclusive proof that there wasn't a body?

"I think we'll wait," Connard said, "until the body floats up somewhere."

"But you said you wanted proof that I killed her. You didn't want to take my word. There are bricks in the sack. Maybe it will never float up."

"There's no hurry," Connard said. "Or is there? Are you in a hurry to go to prison?"

They drove to Jules Antal's apartment. It wasn't much of a place. A grimy building in a rundown neighborhood. Not quite a slum, not quite a tenement. Sleazy, depressing. In the course of his work Connard had become familiar with many such areas. Some were inhabited by nice, law-abid-

ing people. Some were breeding places of discontent and violence.

The building in which Antal lived was brick, three stories, with an apartment on either side of central stairs both in front and rear.

Jules Antal lived on the second floor west. It would have been relatively easy, with a little luck, to get a big sack out of the building without being seen.

Connard and Schlossman both went up, with Antal leading the way. Either no one saw them, or no one paid any attention to the police car in front. Maybe everybody was still asleep on this Sunday morning.

The interior of the Antal apartment, 2-B, was as expected. Dim, close, humid, inhospitable. Antal switched on lights, but they didn't help much. A living room, kitchen, eating nook, bath, and two small bedrooms. The furniture was mostly old and worn. The kitchen was full of unwashed dishes. The general effect was of untidiness, clothes strewn about, newspapers, magazines, cigarette butts, and at least one obvious empty whisky bottle.

There was ample evidence also of recent female occupation. Hosiery, undergarments, a vast array of cosmetics paraphernalia in the bathroom and one of the bedrooms. In that same bedroom also was a closet full of dresses, slacks, blouses, negligees.

Connard ran his fingers lightly over the stuff. It all seemed very wispy, flimsy. He lifted out one of the dresses on its hanger. There wasn't much to it, front or back.

He returned to the living room and sat down with Jules Antal.

"Mr. Antal," he began, "this place is a big mess, but there's one thing I don't see."

Antal had been smoking a cigarette. Now he added another butt to the large collection in a nearby ashtray.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"There is no evidence of a struggle. A woman can't be strangled without fighting back a little. Unless she's drunk or doped."

"Marie did not take dope. She drank, but not that much." Antal seemed less dazed now. He spoke as if in defense of his wife.

"Then there was a struggle?"

"Yes."

"Tell me all about it."

"I have already confessed."

"We need details." Connard slumped into his chair. "Just for me this time, Mr. Antal. Later on we can go back to my office, and you can tell it to a stenographer and sign it."

Antal fished another cigarette out of his shirt pocket, but he had a little trouble lighting it. It took time. Connard was patient.

Then Antal blurted it out suddenly. "My wife was unfaithful to me!"

Connard nodded.

"Wasn't that a good enough reason to kill her?"

"I suppose it's the nearest thing to a reason," Connard said.

There was silence again, during which Antal smoked and Connard waited.

"Isn't that enough?" Antal asked after a minute.

"Not exactly. What happened on Friday night? Had you known about her infidelity before? Or did you just find out about it then?"

Antal fidgeted.

"Was there a guy here?" Connard didn't pause now. He didn't want to give Antal time to invent answers. "What was his name? He'd be a witness."

"There wasn't anybody here," Antal said quickly.

"You didn't actually catch her at it then?"

The man's eyes blazed suddenly. "Yes, I caught her at it, but not here."

"Go on."

Antal seemed to be groping through waves of emotion sweeping over him. "She had been unfaithful to me with several men, but she never brought them here—at least as far as I know—Friday night we argued about it again."

"You'd had arguments before?"

"Yes."

"Only this time it got out of control?"

Antal drew heavily on his cigarette, and the end of it flamed

almost as brightly as his eyes. "I had warned her many times it would have to stop. But she wouldn't listen. She liked men too much. Many men. One was never enough. Friday night she wasn't home when I got here. I waited. It was nearly midnight when she came in.

"I asked her where she'd been. She said it was none of my business. I asked her if she'd been with a man. She said yes, and she laughed. I hit her. I couldn't help it. I had to hit her. It was because she laughed. I had never hit her before, but Friday night I hit her—"

Antal had clenched his right fist; now he pounded it into his left palm as hard as he could, half a dozen times or more. Finally he stopped. He sat still for a moment, then slowly, with his gaze intent upon his audience, he lifted the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it into the ashtray.

"I beat her," he finished, "until she was dead."

Connard sat quietly. "You said before that you'd strangled her."

Antal blinked. "Did I?"

Connard nodded.

"I did everything," Antal answered quickly. "I hit her. I jumped on her and choked her. I beat her head against the floor. I hated her so much. You understand?"

"And you're sure that when you were finished she was dead?"

"Yes Yes." She deserved to die!"

"All right. Where did it happen? Which room?"

"The bedroom."

"Show me."

He followed Antal into the bedroom, where the feminine clothes were hanging in the closet, where the cosmetics littered the dressing table.

"Here," Antal said.

"You killed her here? There was a fight. She must have fought back. There isn't any sign of it. No broken lamps, no broken bottles, nothing spilled."

"I threw her on the bed," Antal said. "I killed her on the bed."

The bed was mussed up, pillows, sheets, bedspread all in a horrible tangle. It could have happened that way. Connard couldn't disprove it.

"I left her body there on the bed," Antal volunteered, "while I tired to decide what to do. That was proper, don't you think, Lieutenant? This was the last bed she ever slept in."

Connard sniffed the air. What would it smell like, a hot room where a dead body had been kept for twenty-four hours? He wasn't sure. But the only odors he could detect here were the stale, musky odors of cosmetics and perfume. Were there any chemical tests he could run? He couldn't think of any. Sweep the bed, the room, the whole apartment, the car trunk,

for remnants of a gunnysack maybe. But would the presence of a gunnysack prove the presence of a dead body?

Unconvinced of anything, Connard left his suspect in the care of Patrolman-Schlossman, and went looking for some kind of corroboration for the suspect's story.

The most informative witness he found was the lady right across the hall. Mrs. Burgess was either a widow or a divorcee with a seventeen-year-old son. The son was still asleep, she said. Yes, she also said she knew a great deal about the Antals.

Connard got an earful. The Antals, according to Mrs. Burgess, weren't the best of neighbors. There was nothing wrong with Mr. Antal, of course, except that since he was rather dark, so he must be a foreigner, and he had that funny name, and he wasn't very neighborly because he seldom bothered to speak to anyone.

Mrs. Antal, however, was something else again. Mrs. Burgess would have been willing to discuss her even if Connard hadn't displayed his police identification. What was wrong with the Antals anyway? Some kind of trouble? It would have been Mrs. Antal, of course, who would have caused the trouble. What had she done? Been arrested? Mrs. Burgess could think of a few things she might be arrested for.

"Were there other men?" Con-

nard asked. "Did Mrs. Antal have any boy friends?"

Mrs. Burgess smirked. "Are you kidding? Lots of 'em. Some man was picking her up almost every day."

"Same man, or different men?"

"Different usually."

"Did men come to the apartment?"

Mrs. Burgess shook her head. "She was careful about that. There'd have been complaints and she'd have been thrown out of the building. This is a respectable neighborhood. No, they'd just come by in a car and pick her up. That was bad enough, but she got by with it. What happened to her anyway?"

"She's missing," Connard said tentatively.

"Well, that's simple, Lieutenant. She went off with one of her friends."

That had already occurred to Connard.

"When was the last time you saw Mrs. Antal?" he asked.

Mrs. Burgess wrinkled her face into a frown. She was an ugly woman. "I don't know. Maybe Thursday or Friday."

"Let's take Friday, Mrs. Burgess. Did you see her on Friday?"

"I suppose so. I saw her almost every day. Always heard the door slam. The hall door up here, or the car door, whenever she'd come in or go out. She never made any secret of it."



"Did she go out Friday?"

"I guess so. Yes, I know she did. Friday afternoon about one o'clock."

"Did she come back on Friday?"

"I don't remember. I miss her sometimes, you know. I have other things to do than just to sit by the window and watch that hussy."

"But you did see her leave?"

"About one o'clock."

"Was she carrying any luggage?"

Mrs. Burgess tried to think. Then her eyes brightened. "I remember what she was carrying. A lot of dresses and things, on hangers and in plastic bags. Quite a lot of stuff. Like she was taking it to the cleaners or something. Why, I never thought! Maybe she was leaving with that guy! Taking just her best things with her, you know what I mean? And leaving the junk behind. She had a lot of fancy clothes. And I'll bet her husband didn't buy 'em all for her either!"

Well, I hope she did leave with that guy. My boy was getting interested in her, and I didn't trust her one bit."

Connard had learned what he wanted, and he left Mrs. Burgess standing there talking. He went back across the hall and confronted Antal with the new information. Antal jumped up from the sofa.

"Yes, she took some clothes away in the afternoon," he argued. "Things that this other man had given her. Maybe he was making her bring them back. But she came home here Friday night. How does Mrs. Burgess know she didn't come home?"

"Sit down," Connard told the man roughly. "You're lying, Antal. You didn't kill your wife. She left you. That's what happened."

"You're taking the word of that woman across the hall against mine!"

"That's right."

"Why would I lie to you?"

"How should I know?" Connard growled. "I'm not a psychologist."

But before he left the apartment, Connard grabbed a framed photograph that hung on the living room wall. It was a photograph of Marie Antal, in a bare-shouldered pose, with neck arched back, lips slightly parted in a seductive smile, long, dark hair seeming almost to be flying, as if she'd been turning her head when the picture had been snapped or had been dancing.

"Antal," Connard asked on his

way out, "is your wife in the entertainment business? Model, singer, dancer, stripper, anything like that?"

"She used to be a singer."

"But not any more?"

"We argued about it."

"Where was her last place of employment?"

"I don't know. Whenever she took a job, she didn't tell me. I didn't want to know."

Connard was at the door.

"I'll take this picture for identification purposes," he said.

Antal stood up, hopefully.

"You're going to drag the river?"

"The taxpayers have better things to do with their money," Connard said.

During the drive home, Connard tried to forget about the wasted Sunday morning. He held the picture of Marie Antal in his lap, and he caught Schlossman glancing at it several times.

"She's good looking," Schlossman remarked finally.

"Sure she is," Connard agreed. "Too good looking for a squirt like Antal."

"You don't think he killed her?"

"I'll bet my badge that he didn't," Connard said.

"Well, why is he pretending he did?"

"Can't you figure it out, Schlossman? How are you ever going to make detective if you can't figure out a simple thing like that?"

"Maybe he just wishes he'd

killed her," Schlossman suggested after a moment's thinking.

"Right." Connard looked at the photograph and agreed. "Wishful thinking, that's what it is. He knows that's what he should have done to her. To avenge his masculine honor, that is. Antal has old-fashioned ideas like that. If he'd been man enough, he'd have killed her. So he's pretending now that he acted like a man. Now it's okay with me if he wants to play-act. But it'll have to be on his own time, not on mine."

BUT LIEUTENANT Mel Connard wasn't finished with Jules Antal. The dark little man paid him a visit early the next morning. His manner was much more rational this time, and more determined. He demanded that the river be dragged for the body of his wife.

"Why are you so anxious about that body?" Connard asked him.

"Unless you have the body you won't believe I killed her. I committed a crime and I deserve to be punished for it."

Connard had a couple of proven homicides on his hands, and he was impatient. He told Antal he was lying, and why it was obvious that he was lying, warned him of the consequences of trying to perpetrate fraud on the police, and virtually threw the man out of his office.

But that was only the beginning. Two days later Connard received a telephone call from a man named

Price. Mr. Price, it seemed, was the owner of the small factory which employed Jules Antal. Connard went to see him.

"I thought you'd be interested," Mr. Price said when they were alone together in his office. He was a fat little business man concerned with the welfare of his employees as it affected the efficiency of his factory, but obviously this was a new problem to him. "This Jules Antal is going around telling everybody in the plant that he murdered his wife last week-end."

Then he gave the details, familiar to the lieutenant—strangulation, a gunnysack weighted with bricks thrown off the Jackson Bridge. Also the fact that the matter had been reported to the police, but that the police had refused to believe it.

"I'm the one it was reported to," Connard said.

"Yes, I know, Lieutenant. That's why I called you." Mr. Price leaned across the desk, creasing his belly against the edge of it. "What I think you ought to know is this. Antal was a jealous man. She was pretty wild, the boys tell me. She came down here several times to pick up Antal after work, and got acquainted sort of. I understand several of the boys took her out. Antal got into at least one fight over it."

"Okay," Connard said wearily. "So he was jealous. But he didn't kill her. He just wanted to, that's

all. She ran away with somebody. He's just trying to save face by pretending he killed her."

"I see." Price sat back in his swivel chair, frowning. "Well, I suppose I can spread the word," he said finally, "but I don't know whether it'll help. It's just not a good thing to have happening on the premises. A man claiming he committed a murder and walking around free."

"If Antal's that much of a trouble maker," Connard advised, "get rid of him."

"Not so easy, Lieutenant. There's union seniority and all that. He hasn't broken any of our rules."

Connard shrugged.

"You haven't dragged the river?"

The question was asked half apologetically, but Connard, the professional interrogator, suddenly became the target of an interrogation.

"No," he said, "it'd be a waste of time."

"You said Mrs. Antal ran away with some man."

"Obviously."

"Who, Lieutenant? And where did she go?"

"I don't know, and don't care." Connard felt his face getting hot and red.

"Don't you really think," Price persisted, "that in a case like this, a man's story ought to be presumed true until it is proved false?"

Connard stood up, angry and defensive now.

"You run your factory, Mr. Price," he said, "and I'll run my department. When we're convinced a crime has been committed, we'll move in. But not before."

After he left Price he regretted his little outburst. He should have been more restrained and polite. He was ready to stake his job and reputation on his certainty that Marie Antal's body wasn't in the river, and he wasn't going to order a dragging operation to prove what he already knew. But what should he do? Work Antal over a little, make him admit he *hadn't* committed a murder? That appealed to him, but of course he couldn't do it.

Or could he?

Next day the lieutenant received a visit from an old friend known affectionately as Ricky.

Ricky was a middle-aged wino who inhabited, with a marvelous capacity for survival, several of the sleazier sections of town, and chummed about with some of the sleazier characters. By avocation Ricky was a police informer.

"Do you know a man named Jules Antal?" Ricky began.

Connard feigned ignorance and prepared for the worst.

"This guy Antal is—or maybe was—married to a beautiful broad named Marie." Ricky's seamed face grinned an almost toothless grin, conjuring up a memory of Marie. "She was a singer at one

time. Always had lots of men friends. Even after she married Antal she had lots of men friends. Now all of a sudden she's disappeared, and this husband of hers, this Jules Antal, is going around to all the places where his wife used to hang out.

"He's telling everybody—especially he's telling all of Marie's good friends—that last Friday night he killed her and threw her body into the river off the Jackson Bridge. Now don't ask me, Lieutenant, why a guy should be shooting off his mouth about a thing like that. But he acts like he's enjoying himself."

More than likely he was, Connard thought. In his own strange way.

"I thought maybe you'd want to look into it, Lieutenant," Ricky said. "Maybe it's true, and maybe it isn't. But Antal may get himself into a lot of trouble telling Marie's old friends that he killed her, and laughing in their faces."

And maybe one of those friends would take care of Jules Antal for him, Connard hoped silently. Aloud he thanked Ricky for his information and sent him off.

The following day it was Joe Barnes, police reporter for the *Herald*. Barnes was an old hand, cigar-smoking, tough, bored with the petty criminals whom the law netted by the dozens and the hundreds. He was always on the lookout for human interest stories.

He stopped Connard out on the sidewalk. "Hey, Lieutenant, what about Jules Antal?"

"What about him?" Connard demanded.

"I just got his story. He says he murdered his wife, but the police won't pay any attention to him."

"Well, he didn't murder his wife."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've got a little horse sense. You've been around, Joe. You know as well as I do that everybody who confesses to a crime isn't guilty of it. Did Antal tell you his whole story?"

"All the gory details."

"Then you should have sized him up. He just wanted to kill his wife. But maybe he's told it so often that by this time he actually believes it."

"Where is Marie Antal then?"

"Eloped with one of her many boy friends."

"Which one and where to?"

"Ask Missing Persons. It's none of my business."

"You're going on your own hunch instead of looking for the facts then. Right, Lieutenant?" Joe Barnes said that in a kind of nasty, threatening way. And he smiled as he said it.

"Look, Joe," Connard shot back at him, "you start printing a bunch of baloney about Jules Antal, and you'll find yourself mighty short of information when something really important turns up."

He strode off. He was becoming angry now, angrier than he had ever been at anyone who had really committed murder.

The assistant chief of police said to Lieutenant Connard, "Mel, I just talked with Joe Barnes. He told me about the Antal case."

"Antal case?" Connard tried to preserve his calm. "There isn't any such case. No crime was ever committed."

The assistant chief was a tall, thin, hawk-faced man. He sat at his desk like a brooding bird of prey, waiting to eat Connard's badge.

"What makes you so sure, Mel?" he asked.

"I've seen similar cases, sir. Jealous of his wife. Rightly so. She runs off with another man. He gets hysterical. Wishes he had killed her, or could kill her. Hurt masculine pride. So he tries to salve his conscience by going around bragging that he did kill her. Or maybe he's hysterical enough by this time to actually believe that he really did."

"Or, Lieutenant?" The assistant chief leaned forward across his desk an inch or two. "You used the word 'or.' You presume one thing is true, or perhaps another thing."

"What I mean is," Connard said quickly, "whichever way it is, Antal didn't kill his wife."

"That's your assumption."

"Based on my experience, sir."

"This man Antal is remarkably

persistent, wouldn't you say, for one who is hysterical?"

Connard gritted his teeth and bowed to superior authority. "Sir, would you rather we drag the river?"

The mouth of the assistant chief thinned to an almost invisible line.

"I don't want the department to look foolish," he said, "by overresponding to some nut's story. But on the other hand, we're also in the business of dealing with homicide. And homicide is your specialty, Lieutenant."

Connard thought fast. "Sir," he said after a moment, "dragging the river would be expensive, and might not prove anything one way or another. If there is a body in there, it'll keep. But another way to get at this is to prove that Marie Antal is alive."

"That's what I was thinking," the assistant chief said.

"Would you give me a couple of days to try to locate her?" Connard asked.

The assistant chief nodded. "Make it fast. Meanwhile I'll try to keep Joe Barnes from printing anything about police department laxity."

HIS CONTACT was Ricky. "I need this and I need it quick," he told the informer. "You know some of the people anyway that Marie Antal hung around with. I want to find out who took her away and where she went."

"She's not in the river?"

"Definitely not. Maybe she's still around town, or maybe she took a trip somewhere. Locate her, that's all I want."

Twenty-four hours later he received a telephone call from Ricky. "Lieutenant," Ricky said, "there's a small-time gambler named Mike Sandio who left town and went up to the Springs last week-end, maybe Friday. Nobody seems to know how long he's going to stay or when he's coming back. And nobody knows this for sure either, but somebody said maybe Marie Antal went with him."

"Thanks," Connard said. "I'm going up there. Keep my office posted."

In less than half an hour he was on his way. He drove alone. He wouldn't need any help. All he would need would be a little luck in finding Mike Sandio.

He found him. The Springs really wasn't a very big place if all one had to cover was the places where a gambler like Sandio might be hanging out. Connard didn't even bother to enlist the services of the local police. This was a kind of private matter, a personal vindication.

He cornered Sandio in a little back room, flashed his identity card. The man was scared at first, implying a guilty conscience, but Connard reassured him. There wouldn't be any trouble if he produced Marie Antal. And he wasn't

planning to arrest her either. He just wanted to talk to her.

Sandio showed him the little bar where he'd left Marie, then on orders, disappeared. Connard recognized Marie Antal from her photograph. She was sitting alone in a corner booth, looking angry and bored, and had perhaps had just a bit too much to drink. Connard sat down beside her.

"Who are you?" she wanted to know.

Again he showed his identity card.

"What do you want with me?" she demanded.

He told her quickly. Just verification that she was alive. Her husband had been claiming that he had killed her. He'd been making a nuisance of himself.

At first Marie Antal was angry at the news. Her dark eyes flashed fire, her nostrils flared, and her full, sensual red mouth tightened and contorted. She was quite attractive in that mood, Connard discovered, almost beautiful.

Then quite suddenly she decided it was all very funny. The red lips parted, sparkling white teeth were displayed, she arched her smooth, graceful neck, and laughed. She was beautiful that way too. There was one thing at least about Jules Antal that Connard could understand, that he could get highly emotional about this woman.

"Poor little Jules," she said. "He always threatens me." She couldn't

stop laughing. She put a hand on Connard's sleeve to steady herself as she leaned toward him a little. He caught a whiff of her perfume, and the top of her hair-do brushed against his cheek. The touch of her, light as it was, produced a strange feeling of intimacy somehow, and strange little currents tingled inside him.

"He threatens you, does he?" He tried to make it sound gruff, like a policeman should sound.

"All the time." She leaned back against the leather upholstery, trying to suppress her giggles. Interesting little ripples ran up and down the skin of her throat. Connard watched them in fascination, them and the rest of her that her low-cut gown allowed to be visible.

"You know something?" Her hand rested on his sleeve again, as if he were an old friend, not an inquisitive cop. "Jules is always telling me the horrible things he's going to do to me. He doesn't want me to have any fun. He wants me to stay home all the time. All the time! And if I don't, I'm going to be sorry. But you know something? He says all these horrible things he's going to do to me, but he never touches me. He's never even hit me. Not once! It's all just talk. Because he knows—he knows—" She laughed again, and the little ripples undulated in her throat.

"He knows what?" Connard prompted her.

"He knows I'll come back. I'll

come back to him. And I'll make him glad I came back. If he killed me, like he always says he wants to, then he wouldn't have anything to wait for. You know what I mean?"

Connard nodded. "You mean you've left him before?"

"Sure. I've got to get away from that lousy apartment sometimes, don't I? Like last Friday. Mike says he'll take me up here to the Springs for a few days. It's a chance to get away. Wouldn't you want to get away? Have you seen that lousy apartment?"

"I've seen it," Connard told her.

"Then you know what I mean. And Jules. Jules is a nice boy. He loves me. I like him. But not for all the time. Like with the apartment. Sometimes I've got to get away."

"Have you been away long enough this time?"

She thought for a minute, smiled at him, and shrugged her bare shoulders. "I don't know. Mike has been losing. He hasn't been much fun."

Connard pursued his advantage. "I wish you'd come back. I'd like to show you to a few people if you wouldn't mind. People who've been thinking maybe you're dead. Like your husband's boss, and a certain reporter, and somebody in the police department."

"It might be fun," she conceded.

"And I'd like to arrange a little scene with Jules. He's been giving me a hard time. I'd like to give him a little surprise, confront him with

the evidence, maybe even rub his nose in it a bit."

She stopped smiling. Instead of a smile, she gave him the full stare of her dark eyes. "All right, Captain."

"It's lieutenant."

"Would you escort me home personally?"

"I'd be glad to," he said.

JULES ANTAL stared at the body. It didn't seem to resemble Marie any longer. Marie had never lain on the bed in that position. Awake or asleep—yes, even in sleep—she had decorated a bed gracefully, as if an artist's hand had arranged her there as his model, a model of Venus, the love goddess.

But Marie was neither awake nor asleep now. She was dead. The blue bruises of strangulation showed on her throat. Her face was contorted; not very pretty. Her nightgown was tangled about her, but grotesquely, not seductively. Jules wondered if any of those men, any of her lovers could love her now. Certainly he didn't.

So he didn't bother with saying good-by. Instead he went quickly to work. Steel handcuffs snapped onto her wrists and ankles, the attached steel chains running through the holes of a dozen brand-new bricks. He brought the gunny-sack from under the bed, and stuffed everything into it, handcuffs, chains, bricks, Marie and all.

Three in the morning. He

hoisted the sack onto his shoulder. It was lighter somehow than he had expected. Perhaps because he felt such exaltation. He went out through the front door. No one was in the hallway, or on the stairs. Of course not. He went down.

Outside in the yard there was no one. The night was moonless, calm, and peaceful. He walked to the car, opened the trunk, deposited his burden inside. Then he drove. He had the streets to himself.

Jackson Bridge was as deserted as if a nuclear bomb had dropped on the city and snuffed out all human life except his own. In complete privacy he stopped in the very center of the span, took his burden from the car trunk, lifted it to the rail, and dropped it over. The noise of the splash was so small that it scarcely disturbed the tranquility of the night at all. He glanced down. Nothing floated there on the water.

He went home to sleep.

And the next morning, Sunday, Patrolman Schlossman ushered him into Lieutenant Connard's office.

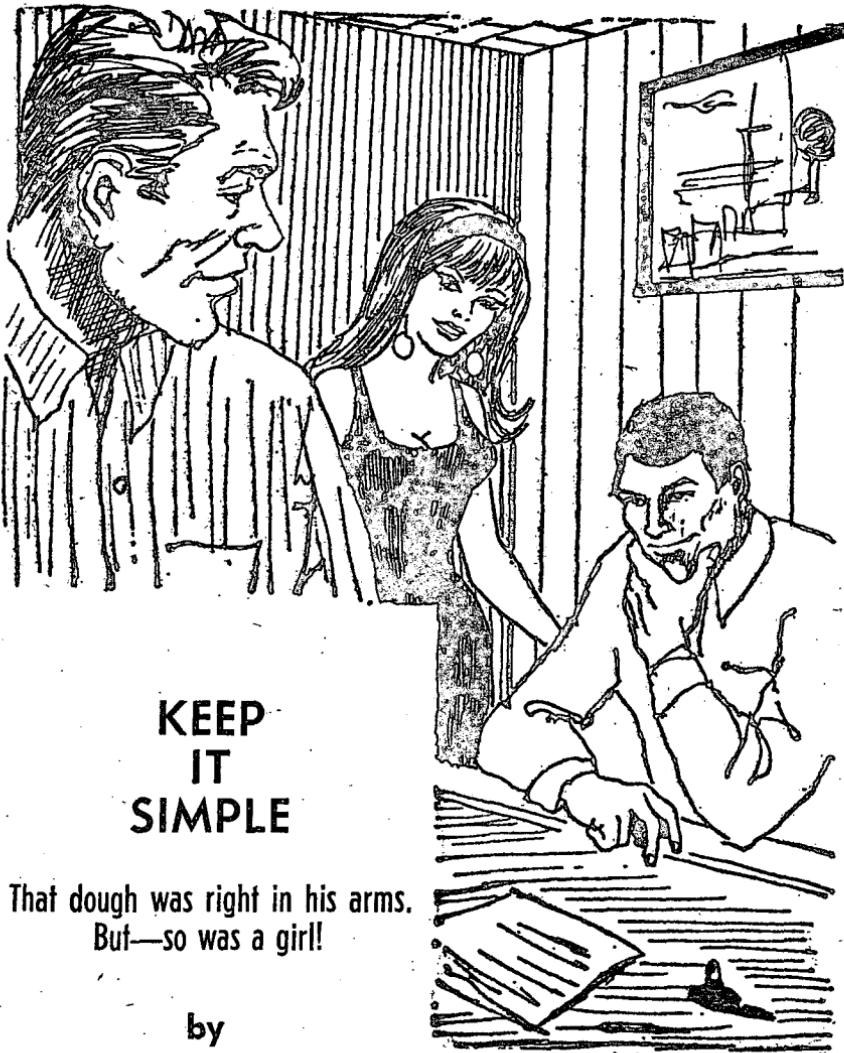
"What's this?" Connard belledowed.

"I've murdered my wife."

Connard leaped around the desk, and for a moment Jules Antal was afraid he was going to be struck. But Connard remembered his police manners in time.

Nevertheless Jules Antal got shouted at. "You're a nut! You're

(Concluded on page 119)



KEEP IT SIMPLE

That dough was right in his arms.
But—so was a girl!

by
CARROLL MAYER

WHEN WE ENTERED the bank, I was thinking of nothing in particular except getting change for a couple of twenties. Five minutes later, when we walked out, I was

mentally kiting that change into the thousands.

Not that I'd come up with any spontaneous, sure-fire gimmick. But standing by while Lou Lodge,

my partner, made the transaction with a pert, redhead teller, I abruptly realized I was witnessing a parlay—Lou, a pretty girl, and stacks of ready money—that fairly screamed for exploitation.

Lou himself pinned it down a moment later when we relaxed in an alcoholic oasis on River City's main drag.

"You look like the cat that ate the canary," he informed me. "You dream up something for this hick town?"

"Could be," I answered Lou. "Looks like your charm is perking again."

"Eh?"

"That chick at the bank. She eyed you like you were Richard Burton."

"Oh? She was a cute trick, wasn't she? Real nice figure, what I could see."

All of which, you might say, was the nub of my burgeoning brain-child. From the con angle, Lou was smart enough. It was where the opposite sex came in that he faltered. He liked the fillies, sure. But he didn't recognize or exploit the full potential of his movie-hero features and physique. His failure to tab the obvious approval in the eyes of that perky redhead teller was a prime example.

"You'll be seeing more of her figure," I assured Lou. "I didn't notice any ring, so she's likely available."

He cocked an eye at me.

"Spell it out," he said.
I shook my head.

"I can't, yet," I said. "But a dame like that, with heavy cash right at her fingertips, is a windfall we can't pass up."

"We can't con a bank, Dave."

"I know that; we'll work on the girl. While I figure an angle, you'll cultivate her. Until we bring her in, we can be area salesmen—magazines, say—marking time here for a week."

Lou still wasn't convinced.

"I don't know," he demurred. "She looked like a smart little cookie."

I finished my beer.

"Sure, she's probably smart," I told Lou. "That's where you come in. Get her emotionally involved. Once she's hooked, I'll take care of the rest."

So that was the start. The following day Lou took occasion to again drop into the bank, chat with our pert pigeon. Her name, it developed, was Audrey Pitcairn and she was, indeed, unmarried and unbetrothed and lived by herself, her parents being deceased. The day after, another chat. After the third visitation, phase one was accomplished.

"We're in," Lou advised me confidently in a back booth at the suds emporium. "She's agreed to go to the movies with me. Tonight."

"Fine."

He slanted that eye again. "There's just one thing."

"Huh?"

"It has to be a double date." Lou built a small grin. "Maybe because she hardly knows me. Anyway, you're taking her friend." The grin broadened. "She's the blonde in the adjoining cage."

Great. I'd visited the bank only that first time, but I still retained a vague recollection of the babe in question. Ash-blonde hair, severely coiffured; thick glasses; no curves to speak of. In a word: mousey.

"You're kidding," I told Lou.

"You know I'm not."

I sighed, managed to match his grin. "Well, it'll be in a good cause," I said.

He sobered. "Dave, Audrey is smart. Plenty. Whatever you've got in mind, it'd better be sure-fire and simple. Even if she does agree to go along, I don't think she'll buy anything complicated."

I grunted; Lou had touched a nerve. Because the sort of caper he'd inferred was precisely what I wanted myself—and hadn't been able to conjure.

"Don't worry," I said, "I'll keep it simple. Just stay in there pitching with her."

Lou did that. In point of fact, while I contrived to stay in the background, in the evenings that followed it was evident that my partner and pigeon Audrey were building up quite a head of steam.

As far as that movie double-date went, plus several subsequent pairings, they weren't actually total

disasters. True, Audrey's blonde friend—Sally Harris, by name—was not apt to make *Playboy's* gatefold, but she was essentially a nice kid. An orphan like Audrey, she lived alone in a private world that featured fanciful dreams and travel folders.

"It must be a wonderful life," she told me earnestly that first night. "You and Lou, traveling all over, seeing new places and people."

"It's a living," I'd answered.

"Some day I'm going to get out of River City, Dave."

"Sure you will, Sally."

My quiet smile might have reassured her; in truth, it was only a frustrated grimace to me. Because I wanted like the devil to get out of River City myself, along with a sizeable hunk of bank funds. But that sure, simple gimmick continued to elude me.

And then, following a bowling foursome at the end of the week, I had it. The thought came to me in the middle of the night, a sudden, pulse-speeding notion that exploded in my subconscious, snapped me bolt upright in bed. An instant later, I got up, began pacing the floor as the idea swelled.

Lou woke up. He peered at me in the darkness.

"Now what?" he muttered.

I switched on the light, perched on the side of his bed. I said, "Listen . . ."

He regarded me as though I was

ready for the funny farm when I finished.

"It'll never work," he said flatly.

"Why not?" I countered. "It actually happens every week or so somewhere in the country. A heister approaches a bank teller and demands money under threat of bodily harm."

"But we're not heisters. It's crazy."

"No, it's not," I told him. And I meant it. As I'd cited, the news regularly carried an item about a lone bandit boldly demanding that a bank teller stow a large sum of cash in a proffered bag, only to be foiled and captured when the teller refused to be intimidated, cried out or sounded an alarm.

But—and this was the kernel of my idea—if that teller had been in on the heist; if, in fact, he'd filled his accomplice's bag as though merely completing a routine business transaction; if he'd delayed alerting any of the bank personnel or pressing the alarm until after his partner had safely departed, at which time he'd professed sheer fright as the reason for his inaction . . .

I went over it again, but Lou still wasn't convinced.

"I just don't know," he said. "It's risky."

"Not if you and Audrey play it cool."

"But suppose she gets hurt? I—well, she's a nice kid."

"She won't," I assured him.

"That's the beauty of the whole bit: it's so darned simple and nobody gets hurt. Audrey merely waits a few seconds, then pretends to faint. By the time they 'revive' her and find out why, you'll be out of the bank. Afterward, Audrey still acts upset, begs off the rest of the day. She meets us as arranged, to skip town with the bundle—"

I stopped, smiled. "Only we haven't waited."

He began to nod slowly.

"Maybe we could pull it off, at that," he granted. Then he abruptly sobered. "But I'd never convince Audrey. She's an honest girl."

Of that I had no doubt. I also had, no doubt I'd correctly interpreted the light in our pigeon's eyes when she gazed at Lou, and the intensity of that head of steam I've mentioned.

"Don't worry about it; that's my department," I told him.

I made my pitch the following night, after a movie date, after we'd squired Sally Harris safely home. I waited until Lou and I were alone with Audrey in her apartment and then I broached the whole caper, tramping the hearts-and-flowers pedal hard.

"Just picture it," I told her. "You and Lou could be together. No more daily grind. And enough money to take you anywhere in the world."

Sure, it was pure soap opera. But from the way Audrey's breath caught, the covert searching of her

hand for Lou's even after she knew us for what we were, I knew we were home. Almost.

"Sally Harris is just living for the day she can get away from this town," I threw in. "I can't believe you're any different."

Her bosom lifted. "I'm not, really," she answered me soberly. "But it wouldn't be honest money, Dave."

"With a chance like this, you'd let that bother you?"

"I might. A little."

I gave her conscience killer number one.

"Forget it," I smiled. "Your bank's insured. The insurance company will stand the loss, and at their rates they can afford it."

She continued to study me. "You truly think we could do it?"

"As I've told you, if you play it cool we can't miss."

For several moments, Audrey said nothing more, merely meeting my gaze. Then, openly, her fingers interlaced with Lou's.

"All right," she agreed softly.

I relaxed. "Good," I said. "There's no point in waiting; we'll do it day after tomorrow. Now, let's check out the details."

IT WAS RAINING on get-away day, which sort of iced the cake. Bad weather could mean less customers in the bank at zero hour, ten o'clock—which in turn could help Audrey's morale. Not that I was overly worried about her back-



ing out or becoming flustered. Once committed—and with the ready knowledge of just what two-thirds of the take would mean for her and Lou—I was sure Audrey would deliver, would faultlessly play her part afterward.

She had estimated she could stuff Lou's proffered bag with fifty or sixty thousand, which was nice estimating.

The routine, as I had expounded, was simplicity itself. After leaving the bank with the haul, Lou would swiftly round the corner to where I'd be parked in a rented car. We'd drive to Audrey's apartment, wait there until she'd completed her act and had joined us, then zip upstate to Capitol City airport and a jet which would fly us to Mexico and happy times.

Of course, I hadn't expounded to our pert pigeon that Lou and my

self were zipping straight from the bank.

There was no hitch. At eight past ten, Lou rounded the corner and climbed into the car, knees cradling an obviously well-filled briefcase, which item we'd purchased locally as more 'business looking' than a bag or satchel to any potential observer.

I grinned, nodded at the briefcase. "She really stuffed it, eh?"

He wasn't particularly smiling in turn.

"I guess," he said as I got the car rolling. "Her work area was below my level of vision and I had to act casual."

"Let's have a quick look."

Lou remained serious, said, "I've been meaning to tell you. It's not just the money with me . . ."

I almost clipped a taxi. "It's what?" I began and then broke off as intuition flickered. Something was wrong, but very; Lou's mien was off-key. "What gives?" I demanded.

"Turn here."

"Huh?"

"Drive to Audrey's apartment. We're waiting for her."

I all but goggled at him. "The devil we are!"

"I mean it, Dave. We're splitting three ways, as we told her, taking her with us."

Abruptly, I understood the script. I'd far underestimated that head of steam. Our pigeon had gone for my partner, yes, but he

had flipped too. My lovey-dovey bit had been all too graphic. Larcenous Lou Lodge was hooked.

"For Pete's sake, man!" I protested. "I know she's cute and all that, but she's just a hick town kid."

He wasn't swayed. "That's how I want it," he answered me shortly. "Now—turn."

Sure, I could have argued more. But Lou's mind was made up; I was licked and I knew it. I sighed.

"I still say you're out of your skull," I muttered—and made the turn.

Audrey had given us a spare key; once inside her place I made another pitch, but Lou wouldn't listen. Suddenly it struck me that in bickering over my partner's infatuation, we still hadn't checked the briefcase.

"At least let's see how much we got," I told him.

He smiled, pleased at my capitulation, hefted the briefcase, then dumped it. "It'll be plenty."

Lou's smile died; he swore softly. I swore too, not as softly. 'Plenty' was three local telephone directories for weight—and nothing else.

Comprehension zeroed in. Our pert pigeon had outfoxed us, but good, was hardly the 'honest girl' Lou had envisioned. Shrewdly aware we were in no position to blow the whistle, she'd neatly switched the caper to her sole advantage.

Lou was still stunned. "I—can't believe it," he muttered. "I really

went for that chick and I thought she went for me."

I didn't commiserate with him. Because another notion suddenly struck me.

"Snap out of it," I said. "We could still be at bat."

"Huh?"

"She set us up as patsies, all right, probably had a duplicate briefcase loaded with those directories and made the switch after she'd stuffed yours," I told Lou. "But after she 'revives', she can't skip right from the bank. She'll want some spare clothes and stuff and that means luggage she wouldn't chance toting to the bank in advance."

I paused, marshaling my thinking. "She'll come back here before she blows town," I decided.

He wasn't convinced. "But we're supposed to be waiting here for her. She won't risk running into us again."

"That was the set-up we gave her," I reminded him. "Now I think she expected us to cross her from the first, and she's smart enough to realize we're bound to check the briefcase the first chance we get. I'm betting she'll figure we'll figure she's not stupid enough to return here."

Lou shook his head. "If you're wrong, she's already long gone," he said. "And don't forget, until she doesn't show up tomorrow, we're the only ones the law will be looking for."

"I know that," I conceded, "but we'll chance another half hour."

My hunch was one hundred proof—but only insofar as Audrey's appearance was concerned. Otherwise, my brilliant theorizing about her dealing us a fast shuffle was a complete bust. Because when she finally arrived, our perky pigeon carried no duplicate briefcase, and one look at the expression of true surprise on her features suggested the guileless truth.

"I—I'm sorry, Lou," she said, completely ignoring me. "I didn't think you'd come here. I thought you'd know I'd confessed to the bank, that you'd have to get out of town."

Audrey's gaze locked with Lou's. "Please understand. I thought I could go with you, live in your world, but I realized I couldn't. That's why I got another briefcase just like yours, and switched them. I didn't want you to be suspicious at the bank but I—I wanted you to go out of my life afterward, when you discovered what I'd done."

Her lips were quivering now. "I had to tell the truth, Lou. But I wanted you to get away. I even played for time, pretended to faint like we'd planned before I told them." She stopped, finished simply, "They called the police and I had to make a statement, but they appreciated I was upset, let me come home."

Hearts and flowers again? You bet. Lou suddenly took Audrey in

his arms and comforted her, glaring at me over her shoulder and patently daring me to make any crack about his punctured romance.

In the interest of harmony I didn't, and immediately afterward we did leave town. We figured a prompt departure was dictated because of Audrey's initial revelation, and we were right. The next day the papers and radio stated the gendarmes had a strong interest in our apprehension—not to mention the recovery of some sixty thousand dollars belonging to the River City bank.

That's correct. Lou hadn't spotted Audrey's hankypanky with the briefcases, but one of her co-workers had and had been shrewd enough to tumble to the rudiments of the situation and to act on sudden inspiration. Unobserved in the

hoopla of Audrey's 'fainting', the abscondee had simply done a fast fade-out with Lou's original, money-stuffed briefcase.

Maybe that ex-teller figured the caper as we'd originally presented it to Audrey; or thought Audrey was pulling some switcheroo; or guessed a modicum of Audrey's true motivation.

Whatever, as far as I know, the law hasn't yet caught up with Sally Harris, the mousey little wren with the exotic travel folders who took that inspired step to bring all her fanciful dreams to fruition. Lou and myself haven't been nabbed, either, which is sour consolation when you consider just how simple—and profitable—the whole thing could have been.

Almost makes a man want to give up crime.

I KILLED HER by C. B. Gilford

(Concluded from page 111)

crazy! Get out of here! I'm not going looking for her again! I'm a busy man! I'm in charge of homicide in this town! But if you show your face in here again, I'll commit one myself! Now get out!"

Antal went, light-heartedly. He'd been afraid before. Now he needn't be. Now if somebody missed Marie, or suddenly won-

dered about what might have happened to her, reported her absence to Missing Persons—or if some ghastly object floated—or was washed up and the matter was referred to Homicide—no connection would ever be made with Marie Antal.

Lieutenant Connard would see to that.

*Out of the night it came, a voice from nowhere,
begging, hinting, commanding—trackless murder!*



HOT

NIGHT

HOMICIDE

by

MICHAEL

COLLINS

IT WAS THE KIND of homicide
that called for one inch of copy
at the bottom of an inside page.
Or that was how it looked when
Lieutenant Mastro of the precinct

detective squad first arrived on
the scene.

The facts were simple and ob-
vious. John Thomas Renzo, male
Caucasian, forty-two years old,

taxi driver by occupation, was shot twice through the plate glass window of The Tugboat Bar & Grill by Rose McCoy, female Caucasian, aged forty, at 10:29 P.M. on a hot Friday night in August.

There were seventeen witnesses inside the tavern, and six more on the street outside. John Renzo was dead when the first patrolman arrived two-and-a-half minutes after the last shot. The deceased, according to all witnesses, did not say anything after he was hit and before he died.

The fifteen men and two women inside The Tugboat Bar & Grill were exact about the time of the shots, because the commercial had just started at the mid-point of the TV show most of them had been watching.

They had all been trying to order drinks at the same time during the break when they were interrupted by the explosions of the three shots and shattering glass.

The bartender, Charles Crowe, hit the floor in the reflex of an ex-infantryman with his eyes focused on the clock: 10:29. The assistant medical examiner later confirmed the time of death as probably exact.

The identity of the killer was equally certain. On the street outside the six witnesses there had been no farther than ten feet from Rose McCoy when she stopped outside the window of The Tugboat, took a 9mm Luger from her

handbag, and fired the three shots with the pistol held steady in both hands.

These witnesses all testified that Rose McCoy had been swearing when she fired, and all agreed that she had swayed as if drunk. Later tests proved that she was very drunk.

John Renzo was struck by two of the three shots. One shot struck him in the back just under the left shoulder, tore a hole in his old World War II field jacket, and lodged against the bone at the shoulder joint. A second bullet hit him in the back of the head and was the fatal wound. The third shot embedded itself in the end of the bar that faced the window.

Rose McCoy made no attempt to escape. After she had fired she sat down on the sidewalk, let the pistol fall, and began to cry. Two of the men on the street, and three from inside The Tugboat Bar & Grill restrained her while other men went for the police.

All this was quickly learned by the first patrolman and the men in the first squad car, and reported to Lieutenant Mastro when he arrived some ten minutes later.

The lieutenant came personally because it was an exceptionally hot night and all four men of his precinct detective squad were out on other calls. A hot night in the city meant a busy night for the police. The shooting of John Renzo was a typical hot night violent



death. Mastro had seen hundreds of such homicides.

The lieutenant set the uniformed men to taking the names of the witnesses, including those of the ones who had decided not to be involved and had vanished: if those names could be gotten from others. He himself checked the identity of the victim, John Thomas Renzo, through his papers and by questioning the witnesses who had known him.

The medical examiner arrived and went to work, although there

was little for him to do, and other patrolmen arrived to disperse the curious.

Mastro then turned his attention to Rose McCoy, who still sat on the sidewalk, crying and babbling. The lieutenant made his mandatory statement concerning Rose McCoy's rights to silence and counsel, and then showed the woman the Luger.

"This is your pistol, miss?"

It was at this point that the trouble began.

"Poor Roger," Rose McCoy said, sobbed.

Mastro held the Luger. "What?"

"I killed him," Rose McCoy said to some vast and empty space she seemed to see before her swollen and bleared eyes. "Poor Roger. I loved him, you know? He was a louse."

"Roger?" Lieutenant Mastro said.

"I told him, yessir," Rose McCoy said. "I told you, Roger!"

Mastro rubbed his beard-shadowed chin as he studied the drunken woman. The bartender, Charles Crowe, was standing close to him. Mastro continued to contemplate Rose McCoy as he spoke to the bartender.

"The victim's name was John Renzo? John Thomas Renzo?"

"That's right, Lieutenant," the bartender said. "Johnny Renzo. He was a regular in here."

"You're sure his middle name was Thomas?"

Another witness chimed in. "Tommy, yeah, Lieutenant. I remember this girl called him Tommy. Tommy the Terror."

"Roger," Mastro said. "Did he use an alias? Nickname?"

"Not that I ever heard, Lieutenant," the bartender said.

"What about the woman?" Mastro asked. "Know her?"

"Never saw her before," the bartender said.

Mastro nodded. Then the lieutenant shivered slightly. He could see the headlines: *Innocent Man Gunned Down*. A hot night death.

"Miss—" Mastro began.

Rose McCoy waved her arms wildly in the hot night. "I wait! I wait, wait! His pay he drinks up. Two months rent we owe. Women? I know about the women! No more women, Roger. No more—nothin'! All alone, you know? I wait. In that sweat box. He don't come. I wait. He don't come—he don't come—"

"You were waiting," Mastro prompted, "but Roger didn't come. So you took the gun and went out looking for him. You thought you saw him in The Tugboat, at the bar. So you—"

Rose McCoy waved her wild arms, her bleared eyes red with anger and whisky. She tried to stand. She failed and slumped back against the building wall. Her voice was vicious.

"He told me!" she cried. "He called and told me Roger's out

drinking again! All night I wait and Roger's out boozing it up again. With a woman! With some tramp! He told me where Roger was so I took the gun, yeah. No more! No more!"

"Someone told you where Roger was?" Mastro asked quickly.

"Yeah, he told me," Rose McCoy cried. "I wait, wait! It rings, you know? The phone. Roger's in the Tugboat drinking and with a woman. Boozing! A woman! Alone in that sweatbox! I get the gun! I run out! I find him! I find—"

Rose McCoy swayed halfway up to her feet. Almost screaming now. Swayed, blinked, and fell over flat on her back.

Mastro bent over the fallen woman. She had passed out. The lieutenant stared down at her for a full minute while the witnesses licked their lips and waited. Then Mastro told his men to put her in the patrol car and take her to the precinct. He stood on the sidewalk in the hot night and stared off after the patrol car long after it had vanished.

The ME finished and had his men removed the body. The uniformed patrolmen cleared the sidewalk. The witnesses were released. The tavern was closed down for the night. Soon everyone was gone except the bartender, who did not seem to know what to do next. And still Mastro stood on the sidewalk staring at nothing.

Then he let out a deep sigh. There was no way out of it. He was going to have to work on the death of John Thomas Renzo.

Mastro started with the home address of Rose McCoy. It turned out to be a single shabby room in a West Side rooming house less than two blocks from The Tugboat Bar & Grill.

He questioned all the tenants in the rooming house. He waited in the room until Rose McCoy's husband came home—Roger McCoy. He took the husband down to the precinct to wait for Rose to sober up.

Next, Mastro went to work on the life and history of John Thomas Renzo. That took a full day.

Mastro plodded from witness to witness, talking to each one. He interrogated the bartender, Charles Crowe, for two hours.

He checked the telephone company.

It all took three days. Then he sat in the office of the captain and made his report.

"Her husband," Mastro said, "is Roger McCoy. Male Caucasian, aged forty-five, electrician, same general height, weight and coloring as John Renzo. When he came home on the night of the killing he was wearing an old World War II field jacket and grey work pants. Renzo had grey pants on, too. From the back, to a drunk, they would have been twins in that bar light."

"Where was McCoy?" the Captain asked.

"Working late," Mastro said. "For real. I checked it. He admits he often lied about working late. The wife knew that. McCoy admits he sometimes drinks in The Tugboat. The wife knew that, too. Only that night he was really working late."

"Mistaken identity," the captain said. "Damn."

"Maybe," Mastro said. "Or maybe murder."

The captain blinked. "Murder? The McCoy woman and Renzo playing under the table, Nick?"

"I don't think so, no," Mastro said. "When she sobered up she still thought she had shot McCoy. She cried like a baby. She wanted us to burn her fast. When I told her New York doesn't burn them anymore she said that was unfair, she deserved to die. When I brought McCoy in she fainted dead away. When we brought her around she was so happy she cried in his arms and hung on like a band-aid."

"So she can act," the captain said. "They're all Academy Award material."

"It took us a day to make her believe she'd shot anyone after she saw McCoy alive. She thinks she must have missed McCoy. She never heard of John Renzo. She thinks we're out to get her."

"Do you believe her?"

"Yes," Mastro said. "I checked

from Renzo's end, and the McCoy's end, and the witnesses' end."

"Sum it up," the captain said wearily. It was still too hot. Sleepless weather. Temper and boredom weather.

"Renzo was a cab driver," Mastro summed up. "He lived alone in an apartment a block from The Tugboat. He'd lived in the same apartment for twelve years. He'd lived in the neighborhood for twenty years. He was a regular in most of the taverns around. No one can connect him to either of the McCoys."

Mastro lighted a cigarette. "The McCoys came from Detroit three months ago. Nothing connects them to Renzo. The Detroit police report they had a record of brawling, but no record of her playing around, and no hint of any John Renzo but they're still working on it.

"Renzo was never west of Jersey City, according to fourteen people who've known him for twenty years. He had two girl friends and neither of them ever heard of Rose McCoy. The two girls couldn't pick Rose out of the show-up. Six of Renzo's best friends couldn't make Rose McCoy in the show. The same with Roger McCoy."

The captain spread his hands. So? Mistaken identity. Open and shut, Nick. An accident. You know we get them. A hot night, a skinful of whisky, a hate on, a gun in her hand."

"Yessir," Mastro agreed, "except for the phone call."

"Phone call?" the captain said warily.

The captain's eyes told Mastro that the captain was not in the mood to hear about a clever murder, or any murder. It was too hot, the complaint sheet was full, and the captain did not like a simple homicide to turn into clever murder at any time. But—

"She and McCoy had been brawling ever since they moved into that rooming house," Mastro said. "All the other tenants on three floors had heard the fighting. The McCoys screamed so loud the tenants even knew what the fights were about—his drinking up his pay and chasing women in bars. The landlord was considering throwing them out because they broke things."

Mastro blew smoke. "That night it was like an oven in the room. Rose was alone, drinking. I found an empty fifth and a half-full pint. No ice. McCoy was still not home at ten-fifteen. She was boiling. The other tenants say they'd heard her yelling to herself, throwing things, for a couple of hours. They were considering calling us by ten o'clock, or so they say."

The captain swore. "But they never do call us. They think about it, but they don't call, and guys get killed."

Mastro chewed his lip. "About

ten-fifteen she got a phone call. No name and she didn't know the caller, so she says. The caller told her that McCoy was in The Tugboat drinking and with a woman. I've got her exact statement."

Mastro opened his notebook and read. "Here it is. 'Someone, I don't know who, called me and told me that my husband was in The Tugboat Bar and Grill. The caller told me that my husband was drunk and with a woman. Then this person said that my husband and the woman were going to do something bad later.'

Mastro closed his book. The captain swivelled in his chair until his back was to Mastro. The captain swore again.

"Damn!" the captain said.

"She thinks the voice was a man," Mastro went on, "but it could have been a woman. The voice was 'funny'. Kind of high and laughing."

"A hophead?" the captain suggested.

"Or a psycho, or a drunk with a big joke, or someone talking falsetto to disguise the voice," Mastro said. "Anyway, Rose McCoy exploded, grabbed the gun, ran to The Tugboat, saw what she thought was McCoy through the window, and shot him."

The captain shook his head. "Not a psycho. Please, not a psycho."

"That call killed John Renzo, Captain," Mastro said.

The captain swivelled back to face Mastro. "A set-up? You're trying to tell me that someone set Renzo up to be shot?"

"The call was the trigger. Without the call we've got a simple accident, and we close it. With the call—"

"All right," the captain said. "Tell me about Renzo. He had an enemy? A mob of enemies?"

Mastro chewed a knuckle. "Renzo played with women. He played the numbers, the ponies, and poker. He drank and had people who didn't like him much. But the women and gambling was pretty minor league, the drinking was small-time, and no one seems to have really hated him."

"Swell," the captain said.

"None of it looks enough for killing, but I'm still digging," Mastro said. "You never know what a killer will think is enough for a killing, and maybe the caller didn't have killing in mind. Maybe the caller figured that Rose McCoy would just give Renzo a scare. Maybe it was a big joke."

"Some joke. What about the call?"

"Local, no trace."

The captain considered the ceiling. "To make it play the caller would have to have known that Renzo was in the bar, that he was dressed like McCoy, that McCoy wasn't there, and that Rose McCoy was drunk, mad, and had a gun. It's crazy."

"Crazy and a long chance," Mastro agreed. "We've both seen crazier, and we've both seen longer chances. And it wouldn't have been so hard to set up, not for someone in that damned rooming house."

"In the rooming house?" the captain echoed.

Mastro leaned in his chair. "They all knew about the McCoys' fights, and what they were about. Anyone in that rooming house knew that Rose was alone, drunk, mad and had a gun. Anyone in the rooming house could have known how McCoy was dressed."

"How about them knowing Renzo?"

"Anyone in The Tugboat would know how Renzo was dressed, and where he was standing, and that McCoy wasn't there. Any regular in The Tugboat probably knew McCoy drank there."

"Put it straight," the captain said. "Tell me your story."

Mastro sat back. "Someone heard Rose McCoy in her room. He knew what Roger McCoy looked like. He went into The Tugboat. He saw Renzo. He had a hate for Renzo. He saw how much Renzo looked like McCoy that night. He got the idea. He went to the telephone and called Rose and waited to see what would happen."

A silence settled over the heat in the captain's office. There was an aura of unreality. Both men seemed to move sluggishly, as if

under thick water. The captain brushed at the air as if trying to clear away the murky liquid.

"Crazy," the captain said. "Just crazy."

"Someone telephoned Rose McCoy," Mastro said.

"Yeah, someone called," the captain said. "Okay, dig. I want whoever made that call."

Mastro went back to work. He questioned all the witnesses again, checked into their lives to look for some connection to Renzo or the McCoys or both. He went around the list of Renzo's friends, enemies, associates and bookies again looking for anyone who had been in the bar or had had any connection to the rooming house of the McCoys.

He concentrated on the tenants of the rooming house, looking for any of them who might also have known Renzo. He then branched out to look for anyone who had known Renzo, even briefly, and who had also had some possible reason to have been around the rooming house, no matter how slim the reason. A milkman, maybe, or a gas man, or a repair man.

Three days later he had found nothing.

"Do you want Homicide, Nick?" the captain asked.

"No, damn it," Mastro said. "I'm going to find that caller myself."

"Two more days, then I give it to Homicide," the captain said.

"Let Gazzo worry. I need you on some nice, clean muggings."

Mastro nodded gloomily. He hated to turn a case over to Homicide. He put in another day as fruitless as the three before it. It was a big city and a crowded neighborhood. He could not connect anyone to both Renzo and the rooming house of the McCoys.

At six o'clock that evening he again sat in the captain's office finishing his written report.

Two furious middle-aged women stormed into the office with the desk sergeant close behind them.

"Taxpayers you keep out?" one irate woman demanded. "Maybe you don't want we should see what you're doing. Nothing, that's what you're doing! Taxpayers you give trouble!"

The captain waved the sergeant out. He smiled at the ladies. Mastro went on with his work. He was not the captain.

"What's the trouble, ladies?" the captain asked politely.

The women were worked up to full steam. Their words tumbled out in a chorus of anger.

"We want these phone calls stopped!"

"Children! Where do they learn such filthy ideas? Baby voices they got, and such terrible, terrible words, such lies!"

"Our husbands are drunk, they say. Our husbands are with women. I'm afraid to answer the phone."

"Kids telling us our husbands are in that dirty Flamingo Club, with women in that awful Tugboat Bar and Grill! Laughing at us. Telling such lies! It must be stopped immediately."

All the captain said was, "Telephone calls? Lies? Kids?"

Lieutenant Mastro slowly put down his pen and stared at the two women.

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